# The Palgrave Macmillan Reading Migration and Culture

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*To my parents, Walter and Rhoda Ojwang, and to my daughter Naledi Akinyi*

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# Contents

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I have received assistance from many, but responsibility for any shortcomings in this book ultimately lies with me.

# Note on Usage

I use the names "Asian" and "Indian" interchangeably throughout this book to refer to East Africans of sub-continental Indian (South Asian) heritage. The term "Indian" was widely used before the Partition of India in 1947, but later given up by many in East Africa in favor of "Asian." However, "Asian" is not entirely accurate for it excludes Arabs, Chinese, Japanese and other Asians. "Indian" too is not entirely appropriate if used to refer to migrants whose ancestral homes are in the modern nation-states of Pakistan and Bangladesh. I occasionally use the appellations "Asian African," "Afrindian" and "Asian East African," which have gained traction in recent times, especially in North America.

# Introduction

The roots of this book reach back to the mid-1990s when, as a postgraduate student, I first encountered the fiction of M. G. Vassanji. Growing up in Kenya, I had read several texts that dealt with the presence of East Africans of South Asian origin, but none of them was by a member of any of the South Asian communities in the region. The figure of the "Indian" was common enough, appearing in popular jokes, formal historical accounts about the emergence of Kenya and Uganda as nation-states, in histories of pre-colonial Indian Ocean trade routes, in stories about the Ugandan-Asian expulsions of 1972, in my uncles' accounts of black labor in colonial-era towns and plantations, in popular music, in novels by black East African authors, and in media discussions of "the racial issue." In the many contexts in which it appeared, the generic figure of the "Indian" was usually, though not exclusively, an object of popular hopes, fears and resentments engendered by the rapid changes brought about by colonial "civilization." It served as a lightning rod for anxieties about a new type of social life, one that was increasingly mediated by money and commodities.

These anxieties were well captured in *Otieno Achach* (Otieno the Deviant/Wayward), the first novel in the Luo language, authored by Christian Konjra Alloo (from Tanzania) and published in 1966. In this story, which I first read as a schoolboy, the picaresque anti-hero, Otieno, wanders about the countryside next to Lake Victoria in north-western Tanganyika, the old colonial name for part of what would later become independent Tanzania. Spoilt by his peasant parents because he is an only child, and dogged by ill luck, Otieno commits many crimes in his short life. In the melodramatic ending to the novel, he is buried alive after becoming trapped, mysteriously, in a grave that has been dug for one of his victims. In an early episode in the novel, Otieno's wanderlust leads him to the home of a kindly "Ja-Hindi" (Luo for "Indian") merchant in the small trading settlement at Kinesi on the shores of Lake Victoria. Here, he finds employment as a domestic servant, a washerman. Working as a laundry-man runs against a masculine code of honor to which he vaguely subscribes, but is willing to compromise because

he is to be paid a monthly sum of twenty-five shillings. Due to his humility, he is promoted to work as a shop assistant, an easier role more in line with his wishes. One day, he learns that the "Ja-Hindi" is temporarily closing shop and going away on a day's visit. Otieno is excited because this is his chance to take a break from the monotony of his work in the shop to go fishing in the lake nearby. However, his desire for adventure is soon dashed when "the woman owner of the house," the wife of the "Ja-Hindi," gives him an unusually large pile of clothes to wash. He is disappointed at this turn of events, but decides to humble himself once again. His discovery that the pile includes an item soiled by an infant, however, takes him back to a past of criminality he thought he had left behind. The son of the merchant, younger than Otieno, noticing the look of disgust on the latter's face, tells him: "*Boi, kaw lewnigo mondo ichak luoko piyo piyo*" ("Boy, take those clothes and start washing them fast!")[1] In anger, Otieno slaps the boy, who rushes into the house and comes out with a hammer, ready to strike back. Otieno wrestles the hammer away from the boy and bludgeons him with it, leaving him for dead. Otieno's last act before he leaves the household is to take as many valuable objects as he can: blankets, bed sheets, clothes, spoons and knives. He returns to his home to resume his old role as a herdsboy, but soon sets out on yet another quest for employment with an Indian merchant when his loot is stolen.

Otieno's story mirrors that in two other early East African novels, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child* (1964) and Okot p'Bitek's *Lak Tar Miyo Kinyero Wi Lobo* (1953) the first novel in the Acholi language, whose title translates roughly as "If your teeth are white, laugh!" In *Weep Not, Child*, the sad story of Njoroge, a naïve victim of British colonial terror during the Mau Mau uprising, is compounded by his employment in an Indian shop, the last act of humiliation before his attempted suicide. In the English translation of *Lak Tar*, titled *White Teeth* (1989), the narrator-protagonist Okeca Ladwong, whose praise name is Atuk, makes satirical comments about an Indian shopkeeper, "the back of whose head had folds like the bottom of an elephant." The context of his bitterness is his pursuit of bridewealth, which takes him to an Indian-owned sugar plantation in southern Uganda, where he takes up employment. At the end of his contract he has not met his target, due to wily shopkeepers who keep him in debt and an inhumane employer who denies him his dues:

> This Indian fellow must be joking! Me, to work as a common labourer again for six months, using a hoe and wearing sisal sacks . . . Atuk to experience once again the roughness of sugarcane blades! Those razor-sharp blades again! Mother at home was nursing a wild and false dream that her son was saving money for marriage and yet here was an Indian slashing off one hundred shillings just like that! And he was standing

> there arrogantly hands in pockets, telling me I was to work as a labourer for six months![2]

The protagonists of *Otieno Achach*, *Weep Not, Child* and *Lak Tar* all express, in varying degrees, an inchoate consciousness of colonial class differentiation. Their encounter with the workings of colonial power as it delineates race, ethnicity and class in stark forms, provides a rude awakening, for they have been born in cultures that less than a half-century before, operated on very different logic. The engineering of class through race, and of race through class, awakens them to the reality that the colonial world provides very little room for social mobility on the part of Africans, and it comes at a near-impossible price.

In introducing this book, I have returned to black literary evocations of the East African colonial scene because they illuminate a point made by the West Indian scholar Walter Rodney about the mutual mediation of black African and Indian colonial subjects through colonial systems of knowledge:

> When an African abuses an Indian he repeats all that the white men said about Indian indentured "coolies"; and in turn the Indian has borrowed from the whites the stereotype of the "lazy nigger" to apply to the African beside him. It is as though no black man can see another black man except by looking through a white person. It is time we started seeing through our own eyes.[3]

I do not read Rodney simply to mean that black and Indian Africans repeated British colonial stereotypes about one another. What I am alluding to is the way in which the very ordering of colonial society made stereotyping almost inevitable. Placed and constrained in specific economic roles, between which there was little room for mobility, blacks and Indians came to occupy mutually hostile subject positions, the bridging of which required leaps of the imagination. In a discussion of Uganda's political economy, Mahmood Mamdani has noted how the British colonial state encouraged the entry of thousands of migrants into the territory from colonial India. Legally proscribed from owning land in the early years of colonialism, the migrants' only viable option for survival was trading, to which they were actively channeled. The Indo-Portuguese Goans were the exception in this regard for they came to occupy the professions as clerks, teachers, doctors, lawyers and priests. Mamdani accounts for the colonial policy of encouraging Indian commerce in two ways. First, Indian merchants had excelled in trade and financing in pre-colonial Zanzibar and its coastal, vassal city-states, which were then under the rule of an Omani-Arab monarchy. Years before the formal colonization, these merchants had established trading networks in interior territories that were later to become part of Kenya, Uganda and

Tanganyika. This prepared them for the role of compradors, middle-men between colonial capital and Africans. The second reason, more insidious than the first, was as follows:

> If the main trading group came from outside the region—from another colony—it would have little historical contact with the colonized masses. The colonized trader learns his nationalism in the market place, his anti-colonialism is a demand for control over the national market. But a non-national trading class which was isolated from the people would fall back on the colonial state for support; it would be politically neutralized. And so it was.[4]

Mamdani's argument is useful for its recognition that East African nationalisms were produced by the very colonial machinery that had driven black people into inchoate racial and class subjectivity. However, disciplined within the strictures of Marxist political economy prevalent in the time of its publication, Mamdani's book gives short shrift to the ways in which the colonial ordering of society played with the imaginaries of Indian and black East Africans. It is this gap in political economy and professional historical discourse—the ways in which economic, political and social realities are apprehended through and refracted in the imagination—that is filled by literary accounts of Indian-African encounters. Reading *Otieno Achach* and *Lak Tar* reveals how such encounters were apprehended through tropes of gender (a silent category, with few exceptions, in historical and political economy accounts of East Africa prior to the 1990s). Black male characters, in these early African language texts, came to understand their position in colonial labor and commercial relations, not through a self-conscious discourse of class, but through tropes of masculine loss. These literary accounts, in their turn, subsume female perspectives on the colonial experience, but in doing so reveal a rich field for scholarly reflection: the ordering of race, gender, sexuality and the "domestic" realm in the (post)colonial scene and how a focus on this might direct studies of Asian East African diasporas in productive new directions.[5]

This book puts a special focus on the domestic realm because it is one of the most fraught themes in narratives of the "contact zones" between Indian and black East Africans.[6] Numerous commentators have remarked upon what they regard to be the exclusive character of Asian African communities, a reputation that owes in part to an ability to retain a sense of cultural continuity in a context of migration. For instance, Sophia Mustafa (the Tanzanian writer and political activist of South Asian origin who, alongside Julius Nyerere and others, shaped anti-colonial nationalism in the country) ruefully noted soon after political independence that "Asians are basically parochial, communal and clannish, and as far as those who originate from the sub-continent of India and Pakistan are concerned, are happy to live

within their own clans, peoples or religious denominations."[7] As I show throughout this book, this ability to form what Mariam Pirbhai calls "tight-knit ethnic and religious enclaves with strong social structures, endogamous relations, and cultural traditions that help preserve a deeply rooted sense of community" takes form through the management of domesticity in its spatial and imaginary, symbolic forms.[8] This book begins from the premise that although this theme has been gestured at in existing studies on East African Asian writing, it has not been broached with the singular and sustained attention that it deserves.

To illuminate the notion of a "domestic" realm, I rely on Rosemary Marangoly George's *The Politics of Home*, one of whose key concerns is how immigrant figures in global literatures in English forge senses of home in conditions of displacement through filial and communal solidarity. If the idea of "home" suggests, at first, a sense of "patriarchal hierarchy, gendered self-identity, shelter, comfort, nurture and protection," George shows how this image masks the elaborate patterns of inclusion and exclusion that go into the making of homes.[9] Whether as a geographical site, a mobile habitus or a mental landscape, "home" is crafted on the basis of inclusions that are "grounded in a learned (or taught) sense of a kinship that is extended to those who are perceived as sharing the same blood, race, class, gender, or religion."[10] Throughout this book, I use "home" to refer to an array of related ideas: as a dwelling-house, a site for family making, a geographical site of origin, a native land and an imagined place of national, ethnic, religious and personal belonging. Virtually all the writers considered in this book attempt to come to terms with the charged meanings invested in British colonial, "native" African and migrant Asian constructions of home in the East African context. They show how colonial practices of racial differentiation and segregation produced senses of self-identity and community, which were in turn reworked through pre-existing notions of belonging on the part of Asian and black East Africans alike.

In exploring themes of self-identity, community and belonging, this book focuses on the sizeable body of literary works by East African Asian writers published from the 1960s onwards.[11] If the picture presented in these writings is anything to go by, the general experience of the diaspora has been one of growing up with a sense of alienation in the region, a feeling which, in turn, has taken form in elaborate constructions of "culture" to provide a protective shield against displacement. The feeling of alienation, more than anything else, has provided inspiration for what is, today, a significant group of writers who take the burdens and pleasures of migration as their central subject. Many of these writers only begin to attract serious attention in the 1990s—owing in part to the success of M. G. Vassanji, whose first novel, *The Gunny Sack*, was published in 1989. My initial encounter with this text, and I would imagine for other East African readers too, was eye-opening, for I was for the first time encountering the story of East African

Asians not from the perspective of black grievance and colonial stereotype, but from that of an "insider." Being an "insider" is not risk-free but provides nuances of East African Asian experiences that disappear under the "bold type" of colonial and nationalist discourse. Although Vassanji has almost become synonymous with East African Asian writing as a whole, he is preceded on the scene by a large group of writers whose contribution to both African literature and the writing of the global South Asian diaspora has been underestimated. The post-independence traditions of Asian writing in the East African region can be traced to *Penpoint*, the literary student magazine of Makerere University in which the talents of East African writers of English expression such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Jonathan Kariara, John Nagenda, Pio Zirimu and David Rubadiri were incubated in the early 1960s. Alongside this group were young contributors of South Asian ancestry such as Peter Nazareth, Bahadur Tejani, Tilak Banerjee, Sadru Somji, Adolf Mascarenhas, Yusuf Kassam, Sadru Kassam and Mohamed Virjee. Of the latter group, only Tejani and Nazareth have attained prominence in literary circles, which may be due to their vocation as literary critics. Indeed, both of them are as well-known for their works of literary criticism as they are for poetry, drama and prose fiction. In addition to the Makerere group of Asian writers were others such as Rajat Neogy, the founding editor of *Transition*, the famous African literary magazine, who was also a poet and an essayist of note; medical doctor and novelist, Yusuf Dawood; lawyer and poet, Pheroze Nowrojee; the playwright and hotelier, Kuldip Sondhi; teacher and playwright, Ganesh Bagchi; poet and playwright, Jagjit Singh; and Hubert Ribeiro (de Santana), the Kenyan-Goan poet. Autobiographies and communal histories have been produced by John Maximian Nazareth, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, Rasna Warah, Mahmood Mamdani, Sofia Mustafa, M. G. Visram and Pally Dhillon, among others.

The first novel by an East African of South Asian heritage, Bahadur Tejani's *Day After Tomorrow* (1971), set the stage for the coverage of the theme of migrant Asian constructions of home, a theme taken up by later authors such as Vassanji and Jameela Siddiqi. In *Day After Tomorrow*, Tejani depicts Asian dwellings in East Africa as barricades against the Other, and tries to imagine solidarities across the boundaries of race, ethnicity and religion. In his attempt to enact an imaginative bridging of the chasms of race, Tejani writes inter-racial romance as an allegory for a desired polity, one in which earlier concerns with racial reproduction have been abandoned. This theme is replicated in, among many others, Jameela Siddiqi's satirical depiction in *The Feast of the Nine Virgins* (2001) of the Small Town Indian Morality Committee, one of whose key aims is the prevention of Afro-Asian marriages. Figures of inter-racial conjugality reappear in Vassanji's fiction, but the romances invariably end up in failure, which could be read as the author's recognition of the difficulty of resolving complex historical problems on a literary terrain. Discourses of gender, sexuality, race, religion, caste, domesticity and

class, linked as they are with the desire for cultural reproduction by migrant communities, are key themes in the writings discussed in this book.

One of the key risks in undertaking a study such as this one, which focuses on much-favored themes of post-colonial criticism, would be to flatten the nuances of the body of writing by imposing upon it the pervasive ideas about migrancy, diaspora and marginality on what would thus be constituted as a pliable body of texts whose sole function would be to provide evidence for *a priori* theories. In a repetition of older forms of cultural subjugation, these texts would be used simply as blank slates upon which the desires of the critic would be written rather than as entities that emit signs regarding how they should be read. As Vijay Mishra has warned in his groundbreaking book on the literatures of the global Indian diaspora, there is "an uneasy postmodern trend towards collapsing diasporic (and historical) differences," one in which local histories are obscured in order to secure a singular, universal meaning to diasporic experience.[12] If I take a cautious approach to the established categories through which East African Asian writing might be read, it is because the key terms in this book—memory, otherness, exile, hybridization, nationalism, ethnicity and identity—lend themselves too easily to the kinds of appropriation Mishra warns about. How might we, while paying attention to these terms—which are indeed the ones that the writers in question privilege in their works—arrive at readings that would take seriously the local meanings of these terms, and their specific history in East Africa? Beyond the commonplace assumptions of contemporary literary theory, how can we conduct readings that take seriously the historical meanings of the strategies that the writers have deployed in addressing the presence of people of sub-continental Indian heritage in East Africa? What is the price paid in the construction of diaspora communities, and how do the writers in question deal with the burdens of heritage? How do these works write empire and nation, and what are the particular historical motives behind such representation? How are the relations between the "Asians" and the "Africans" depicted in these works and what kinds of ideologies underpin these representations? Against what kinds of discourses are these works written, and what does this tell us about the relations of power in the historical contexts that are evoked? From what "libraries" of representation are the tropes deployed in this literature derived, and what does this tell us about the intellectual history and the imaginative affiliations of the writing?

The starting point of this book is that East African writing has generally been carried out in a context of dislocation and racial discourse as a consequence of the particular trajectories of colonial, capitalist modernity in the region. However, the pivotal role of displacement in the formation of the region's literary culture does not mean that there has been a uniform attitude to the meanings of migration and the accompanying anxieties about cultural belonging. The book therefore reflects on the concept "migrancy" and cognate terms such as "exile" and "diaspora" and their place in East African

debates. I argue that in the older tradition of anti-colonialism, displacement was privileged as a starting point for discussions of modernity, but that its treatment was mostly a preparation for the restoration of those cultures and histories that had been repressed or denied in the process of modernization. It is within this older tradition that I locate East African Asian writers of the immediate post-independence period (1960 and 70s), such as Peter Nazareth and Bahadur Tejani. In the case of more recent writers who write in the context of globalization, postmodernism and post-colonialism—represented here by M. G. Vassanji—displacement is privileged as a figure for cultural change, and the quest for national belonging is treated with a degree of doubt. I examine both of these positions in relation to what they conceal, and also the insights they offer in relation to debates about home and homeliness.

In the course of diasporic attempts to build cultural communities as a defense against dislocation, considerable pressure has often been brought to bear on the relations between men and women as the basis for such constructions of community. In virtually all of the works under study, gender and sexuality are frequently presented as key figures in patriarchal claims about cultural identity and in the representation of the Other. I examine the political logic of such uses of gender and sexuality, and the varying ways in which the writers in question give treatment to such politics. I pay special attention to the debates about "hybridity" and "cultural synthesis," the extent to which they are linked to sexuality, and the ways in which the writers deploy these terms in their utopian hope for African-Asian relations in East Africa. As I hope to show, the faith many of the writers invest in hybridization depends on a problematic conflation of the terms "race" and "culture," and the ascribing of troubled relations between Africans and the Indian diaspora to differences in "culture." If notions of hybridization and ideal domesticity presuppose heterosexual diasporic subjects, I show how a younger generation of writers, represented by Shailja Patel and Ghalib Shiraz Dhalla, write queer sexuality to displace the claims of diasporic cultural nationalism.

In reading the representation of anti-colonial and nationalist politics, the book shows the extent to which the writers understand social conflict as a function of cultural difference, hence their privileging of cultural tolerance as a way out of social tensions. In keeping with this logic, some of the writers suggest that irony, and the coexistence of polarities, is the marker of an enabling politics. Although I acknowledge the usefulness of irony, both as a mode of narration and as a political attitude, especially in contexts of transition such as those depicted in the literature, I show the pitfalls of the politics of irony. In order to make this argument, I compare the sense of doubt that informs much of Vassanji's work, influenced as it is by relatively new postcolonial debates on multiculturalism and diaspora, and the older tradition of a literary "commitment." I argue that this older tradition is

marked by a sense of cosmopolitanism that newer "post-colonialist" readings routinely ignore in attempts to lay the foundations for a new canon. As should be clear from the above, no proper understanding of East African Indian writing could be possible without an engagement with the idea of the past and its irruption in the present, for outlining the context of literary production inevitably means a dense interrogation of history. The book therefore examines Vassanji's self-conscious ruminations about the past and its recovery in memory. In an important sense, Vassanji's treatment of the idea of history is itself a marker of the various intellectual landscapes that he occupies. As a member of a minority diasporic community, he privileges history as a defense against cultural oblivion, even if memory of the role of the community in the colonial project is the cause of much reflection in his work; as a writer whose affiliations are modernist, he desires an escape from the nightmare of history; and, as a postmodernist of sorts, he depicts history as a field of "play" among different voices and versions.

As I argue throughout the book, it would be impossible to make sense of the approaches of the different authors to their craft without some understanding of their intellectual contexts, the broader history of the South Asian presence in East Africa, and indeed, the subsequent migrations to Europe and North America. In order to contextualize the writing and its cultural politics, I provide a brief sketch of the South Asian history of contact and exchange with East Africa, which shows the tenuous basis of the exclusive senses of belonging that came to be forged in European colonial discourse, Asian migrant cultures of the colonial period and, later, African nationalism.

Historical studies on travel, trade and cultural exchange across the Indian Ocean suggest that contact between the Indian sub-continent and eastern Africa goes back more than two millennia.[13] The earliest written account of this contact, *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*—scripted around CE 80 by a Greek pilot of Berenice, a port on the Red Sea—provides an account of Arab and Indian ships trading with the East African coast.[14] Writing in the thirteenth century, the Venetian traveler Marco Polo remarked upon the Indian ships visiting the islands of "Madeigascar" and "Zanghibar."[15] Although the date of the first Indian settlement in East Africa is not certain, a Chinese geographical text from the thirteenth century mentions a Gujarati settlement in the area.[16] By the end of the fifteenth Century, such settlements were so well-established that the Portuguese sailor-explorer, Vasco da Gama, was piloted across the Indian Ocean, from Malindi on the coast of present-day Kenya to Calicut on the Indian Malabar coast, by a Gujarati navigator.[17] Even at this stage, a mini world-system was already in existence, an "Indian Ocean World" that encompassed the East African coastal cities, the Middle East, South Asia, the Far East, and the oceanic islands of Madagascar, Indonesia and Malaysia.

The arrival of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean arena at the end of the fifteenth century significantly reduced the volumes of trade that had passed

through the old networks. A strong recovery was realized only in the first half of the nineteenth century after the defeat of the Portuguese. The decline of Portuguese imperial power in the Indian Ocean in the eighteenth century, and the rise of Omani Arab power on the East African coast, among other factors, prepared the ground upon which the old Indian Ocean networks once again flourished. Nineteenth century accounts of the East African coast by British explorers and imperial bureaucrats betray how the older cultures of accommodation fostered in the networks of pre-colonial Indian networks of trade came to be unmade in an age dominated by European colonial discourse. Even at this early date, the Indians who acted largely as customs officers, bankers, money-lenders and money-changers were the object of resentment, evident in the stereotypes of the time. The "Banyans"—as the Indian merchants of Zanzibar were called—were "despised by the Arabs and obliged to submit to insult and indignity."[18] In a repetition of European anti-Semitic attitudes prevalent in the age, Richard Burton the British explorer admired the assiduity of the Banyans who "rarely enjoyed the siesta," but also saw them as "local Jews" who were "unscrupulous and one-idea'd in pursuit of gain" in manipulating weights and accepting stolen goods.[19] The Indians were described by European observers as opportunistic "birds of passage" who would go back to India after making a profit, in spite of the fact that their commercial investments suggested long-term commitment to the region. Although the European commentators were themselves travelers whose relations to East Africa were ambivalent, they attributed this ambivalence to the Indians, who they came to see as not quite belonging.

In spite of the condemnation of the Banyans by British slave-trade abolitionists, missionaries and explorers, with growing colonial interest in East Africa, practical considerations came to dominate the approach of British imperial bureaucrats to the Indian presence. The bureaucrats may have looked down on Indians, but could not really do without them if the colonization of East Africa was to bring profits. Wittingly or unwittingly, these early groups of traders on the coast became the advance guard of Indians that would later constitute a comprador diaspora in East African colonial territories. In addition to the comprador element, Indians (the majority being from Punjab) were absorbed into the early colonial economy as indentured labor for the construction of the Kenya–Uganda railway between 1896 and 1903. It is a sign of the hardships that the thirty-two thousand indentured laborers had to endure—plagues of jigger-infestations, man-eating lions, harsh weather conditions and workplace accidents—that over two thousand four hundred died while six and a half thousand were invalided during the building of the line.[20] In 1901, when the first phase of the railway was completed on the shores of Lake Victoria, less than seven thousand decided to stay behind as railway employees or business-people. In the wake of the railway construction workers came several small-scale shopkeepers, or *dukawallahs*, especially from the north-western Indian regions of Cutch and Gujarat to

sell goods to railway construction workers, but also to service the little towns that had by then begun to appear along the main lines of transport. These early waves of immigration were actively encouraged by the Imperial British East Africa Company (IBEA Co), which believed that the Indians were better suited to the role of petty traders than Europeans because they were more willing to tolerate hardship and lower profit margins.[21] Sir Harry Johnston, in a letter to Prime Minister Salisbury, was to marvel at the role of capitalist acculturation that the Indians had played in the region:

> I wonder if in England the importance of one aspect of this Railway construction has been realized? It means the driving of a wedge of India two miles broad right across East Africa from Mombasa to Victoria Nyanza. Fifteen thousand coolies, some hundreds of Indian clerks, draughtsmen, mechanics, surveyors and policemen are . . . carrying the Indian penal code, the Indian postal system, Indian coinage, Indian clothing, right across these wastes, deserts, forests and swamps.[22]

It is instructive that Johnston uses the image of a wedge lodged right across the length of East Africa, as if to admit that the consolidation of capitalist modernity also meant social division and alienation on a scale hitherto unknown in the region. Throughout British East Africa, Indian troops—especially Punjabi Sikhs and Muslims whom the British stereotyped as martial in comparison to the pacifist Hindus—were used in the "pacification" of local populations.[23] Given the contribution the Indians made to the colonial effort, Johnston, Her Majesty's Special Commissioner to Uganda (1899–1901), was to comment that East Africa should indeed become "the America of the Hindu."[24]

However, the hope of early colonial bureaucrats that East Africa could be a "home" for Indian migrants was soon in competition with the hostility of the British and South African farmers who settled the prime areas of what was later to become the Kenya Colony. With the start of European settlement in Kenya, white farmers put considerable pressure on colonial officials to stop "the terrible Asiatic menace."[25] In the two decades following Governor George Eliot's decision in 1902 to encourage white settlement in the Kenya Highlands, Indian political activists campaigned against the colonial-settler stranglehold on land ownership, the granting of exclusive voting rights to Europeans and racially discriminatory immigration laws whose objective was to turn Kenya into a "white man's country."[26]

Given white fears about Indian dominance in commerce, the colonial state, together with the powerful European settler lobby, began to act as a surrogate for "native" interests. In reply to Indian claims, the Europeans maintained that they were merely acting as trustees of African interests, and that those interests were "the white man's burden." John Maximian Nazareth, the Goan-Kenyan lawyer, was to remark in his autobiography

*Brown Man, Black Country* that trusteeship was simply a case of "sheep delivered to the fangs of the wolves by constituting the wolves the shepherds of the sheep" and that "the truth about the white man's burden is that the black man bears it."[27] The tussle between Indian and European colonists had important consequences for the emergence of the African nationalist movement in Kenya, with the white settler community being made, against its will, to concede to the notion of "native paramountcy."[28]

In neighboring Tanganyika, the initial eagerness with which German colonial officials had encouraged Indian immigration soon turned into suspicion, with Indian migrants seen as constituting a "national danger" owing to their status as British subjects. When the Maji Maji anti-colonial uprising broke out in the southern districts in the early 1900s, several Indian traders were arrested and convicted for gun-running and the provision of supplies to the rebels, a historical episode which M. G. Vassanji fictionalizes in *The Gunny Sack*. The Indians were, like the Africans, subjected to a ruthless system of "native justice" which was administered by hand-picked officials without any formal training.[29] In Uganda and Zanzibar, the two British East African territories where there was no white settler colonialism, the early colonial policy of encouraging Indian immigration was soon replaced by restrictive measures, including tight controls on Indian trading. Legislation was put in place in Uganda in 1913 to curb the dominance of Indian middlemen in the cotton trade, with the intention of giving a virtual monopoly of the industry to European ginners. In Zanzibar, some of the most notable infringements on the freedom of the Indians were the Magistrates Jurisdiction Decree of 1908, which deprived them of the right to trial by jury and of appeal to the Bombay High Court, and the Ngoma Regulations Decree of 1909, which attempted to regulate leisure time by prohibiting African and Indian music between sunset and sunrise, except by special permission.[30] Whatever their tribulations under the different colonial regimes, however, the Indians had legal protection in regard to commercial property, which Africans did not. The colonial administrations across the four territories—Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika and Zanzibar—carefully engineered a three-tier racial system, with the Indians cultivated into a median position, to provide a buffer between the Europeans and the Africans. In their much stereotyped role as a buffer, they were to absorb most of the resentment against the new cash economy, although they were never its sole or even primary beneficiaries. The ideological apparatuses of the colonial state—the press, the Christian missions and the schools—encouraged this resentment.[31]

However, the colonial doctrine of "native paramountcy" and the stereotypical positioning of the Indians as a buffer did not prevent political cooperation between African nationalist activists and members of the Indian Association, who were vying for equal rights with the Europeans. Early African nationalist leaders like Harry Thuku and Jomo Kenyatta actively

collaborated with the Indian Association and Indian-owned presses in the 1920s, with regard to the publication of political material.[32] This trend of political cooperation across the racial chasms of colonialism continued throughout the colonial period. However, the attainment of independence in the four East African states in the early 1960s provided a catalyst for massive Indian migration out of the region. During the Zanzibari Revolution of 1964, organized by agricultural workers who comprised the majority, the Omani Arab dynasty was overthrown and Asians expelled en masse, with the majority going to Pakistan, India, Dubai and North America. This, together with the Ugandan Asian expulsions of 1972, convinced many Asians in other countries within the region that their future in East Africa was uncertain. These traumatic events of the early post-independence period were but the most extreme expressions of the nationalist desire to exclude South Asian migrants from East Africa.

Since the 1990s, a large body of critical writing has emerged that reads East African Asian experiences and diasporic imaginaries as figured in literary texts by Vassanji, Peter Nazareth and Tejani. However, no sustained, book-length study has been devoted to this body of literary texts, and the articles and book chapters that do exist are mostly broad overviews of select themes in the literature or detailed readings of a few texts.[33] Peter Simatei's book *The Novel and the Politics of Nation Building in East Africa* (2001), which focuses on Vassanji and Peter Nazareth in terms of their scripting of nation as a space of exclusion, comes close to the intention of this book in terms of the kind of contextualization that makes it possible to read the writers in relation to the wider field of African literature. However, since Simatei's concern is East African writing as a whole, his discussion of writers of Asian origin is restricted to one chapter. Whereas Simatei pays brief attention to two writers, Vassanji and Peter Nazareth, this book closely examines ten writers: Vassanji, Tejani, Peter Nazareth, Jagjit Singh, Nanji Kalidas Mehta, Jameela Siddiqi, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, Ghalib Shiraz Dhalla, Shailja Patel and Kuldip Sondhi. Martin Genetsch's *The Texture of Identity: The Fiction of MG Vassanji, Neil Bissoondath and Rohinton Mistry* (2007) provides a dense contextualization of Vassanji's fiction, but mostly in terms of how it is positioned within debates about Canadian multiculturalism, an approach that does not address one of the author's other important contexts.

Recent studies of South African Indian literature provide useful reference points for situating East African Asian writing in the literature of the global South Asian diaspora. In *Afrindian Fictions*, Pallavi Rastogi uses the names that South Africans of Indian origin give themselves as a basis for a discussion of diasporic identity. Beginning with the view of Fatima Meer, a famous anti-apartheid activist who rejects "Indian diaspora" as a descriptor for South Africans of Indian ancestry, Rastogi argues that this community desires full citizenship and national belonging in ways that trump any other affiliations. For Rastogi, a number of South African writers of Indian descent claim

not only citizenship but an indigenous status. The claim to an indigenous status rests on the following: long residency in the country, "the hybridization of the national consciousness," participation in anti-racist politics, and strong bonds with the land born of indentured labor in colonial-era sugar plantations. Noting that "Indianness exists in South Africa in an *Africanized* state," Rastogi names it as an "Afrindian" identity.[34] Although all the factors that Rastogi uses to explain the Africanization of Indian identities in South Africa have also featured in East African Asian experiences, the politics of identity in East Africa have taken different trajectories. As the Kenyan writer, Rasna Warah, has noted, unlike their counterparts in Britain, the West Indies and South Africa, East African Asians "have remained fairly insulated against the culture of the country of their adoption" with most able to "speak their mother tongue, follow religious rituals . . . and have some vision of what their ancestral country is like."[35] East Africa's proximity to the Indian sub-continent and the strong comprador position of its Indian communities in the British colonial period, together with the fact that the diaspora has been (at least since the Second World War) mostly mercantile, professional and middle class, have contributed to the stereotype of insularity. Given that the sheer majority of East African Asians are descended from voluntary migrants, they can be classified, following Edouard Glissant's taxonomy, as a transplanted rather than a transferred diaspora.[36] As a transplanted diaspora, one that has retained material rather than simply imaginary links with the sub-continent, East African Asians have managed to carry over linguistic, filial and material signs which, in Mariam Pirbhai's terms, "ensure communal wholeness."[37] As I show in this book, East African Asian writers engage in complex reflections on culture, with some, such as Bahadur Tejani, holding the view that cultural wholeness is burdensome, in so far as it prevents the fusions that would enable the emergence of new cultural configurations.

The interrogation in South African Indian literature of apartheid assumptions about the incommensurability of racial groups is the focus of Ronit Frenkel's *Reconsiderations*, whose argument is that identity in the literary works that she considers is relational and not Manichean, as apartheid would have it.[38] Like Devarakshanam Govinden's *Sister Outsiders,* Frenkel's book shows how the sustained struggle against apartheid policies of racial and ethnic exclusivity fostered Black counter-politics whose goal was to erode separate identities. This tradition of non-racialism and anti-racism, associated with the African National Congress and the Black Consciousness movement, culminated in a Black identity that included all subjugated racial groups: Indian, African and Colored. In the post-apartheid context, so Govinden avers, the radical politics of anti-racism has made way for "an upsurge of interest in multiculturalism, especially an uncritical, reductionist kind, which seems to invoke a 'peaceful', but still separate, coexistence of the various ethnic or racial groups." On the other extreme end of the scale is radical "universalism" which ignores "the reality of people's lives."[39]

In spite of their astute reading of the complex ways in which South African writers of Indian origin have approached race and ethnicity, Frenkel and Govinden do not give much attention to categories of identity on the Indian sub-continent and how these came to be reshaped by colonialism. In this book, therefore, I read identity not only in relation to colonial discourse but also with some attention to the way endogenous South Asian categories came to be transformed in colonial contact zones. For a region like the East African coast where the South Asian presence predates colonialism by several hundreds of years, I argue that it is crucial to look beyond colonial categories of identification.

In spite of the homogenizing tags, "Asians" and "Indians," East African communities of South Asian origin are quite diverse in terms of ethnicity, caste, language, regions of origin and religious affiliation. Although there is a temptation to speak glibly about the Indian "community" in East Africa, such a construction conceals several complex layers of identification. The narrator of Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* remarks upon these sectarian differences. It is only the realization by these sectarian groups that they need to fend off racial hostility that compels them to mobilize a pan-Indian identity: "We are one . . . we Asians must stay together."[40] This oscillation between sectarianism and a wider pan-Indian solidarity exemplifies Chinua Achebe's observation about the "concentric nature of identity," which Frederick Buell elsewhere likens to an onion.[41] Whenever it is expedient, the sectarian rivalries are suspended and an omnibus Indian identity claimed, but this does not completely write out the differences beneath, as *The Gunny Sack* once again shows: "But where . . . everyone else . . . saw 'Asian,' the Asians saw Shamsi, Ismaili, Hindu, Sikh, Memon, Ithnashri" (*Gunny Sack*, 146). It is important to note that East African Asian writers shuttle between a wide array of identities. In spite of his long stay in North America, Vassanji sees himself as an "Afro-Asian." Peter Nazareth, for his part, enjoys the identity-play that a variegated cultural inheritance makes possible: "African, East African, Goan, Indian, Asian, Third World, Asian American" all at the same time.[42] Shailja Patel claims her native Kenya assertively, with little of the ambivalence that marks the relation of the diasporic South Asians of Vassanji's fiction to their places of abode. The enigmatic Hubert Ribeiro (de Santana), grandson of the first doctor in early colonial Nairobi, was, for his part, known for his distance from his Goan heritage in pursuit of an Irish identity. So convincing was Ribeiro's acquired Irishness that the urbane publisher, scholar and poet, Jonathan Kariara—then working for Oxford University Press in Nairobi—rejected, for not being "African," the manuscript for his first volume of poetry *El Peregrino* (1971; "The Peregrine"), eventually released in limited quantities by a small California publisher.

Throughout this book, I read East African Asian articulations of cultural identity in relation to the regional historical context. However, assuming that East Africa is the only region with any analytical value as far as the

reading of the literature in question is concerned risks ignoring other equally important contexts. A large group of East African Asians today constitute a "double diaspora" in the sense that they straddle the two categories of Indian diaspora that Vijay Mishra lays out in his compelling volume *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora*. At one level, they are the product of the old diaspora expatriated to British colonies in the era of early modern, classic capitalism. In the aftermath of decolonization, a large percentage have joined the new Indian diaspora of the "late modern or late capitalist" phase.[43] The second leg of migration has been primarily to Western Europe and North America, where several of the writers discussed in this book live. Given this double migration, the context for an expansive understanding of East African Asian writing, especially that produced since Vassanji's appearance on the literary scene, ought to include a terrain wider than South Asia and East Africa alone. It is clear that East Africa is not the sole point of reference for the writers under consideration, especially Vassanji, who writes about the region from the vantage point of Canada, and some of whose novels—*Amriika* and *No New Land*—are concerned primarily with the lives of East African Asian migrants in North America. Although the concern with the East African experience never quite disappears from such works, it is crucial to keep in mind always that metropolitan spaces are constitutive of their moments of production. A similar observation could be made about a text such as Peter Nazareth's *In a Brown Mantle*, which, although written and published in East Africa, has an exile in Europe as its narrator-protagonist. Clearly, there are several umbrellas under which these texts could be put: the literatures of the global Indian diaspora, Canadian literature, the literatures of the Indian Ocean World, and so on. They have a transnational character rather than a narrowly national one. It is useful to remember, though, that even the concept of an "East African literature" is itself already transnational, reflecting the kinds of intra-regional processes that confound sense of belonging to specific countries. Makerere University (widely credited as one of the most important sites for the emergence of East African writing), the common experience of British colonialism and the East African Community, all converged to produce an entity known as East African literature. It is difficult, for example, to read the works of Peter Nazareth without getting a sense of his affinity to Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Grant Kamenju, two other notable proponents of a socialist aesthetic in the region whom he encountered at Makerere and Leeds University. The relative ease with which one could migrate from one country to the other during the period of British colonialism and before the demise of the East African Community in 1977 explains why the writers in question routinely draw upon historical experiences from all the countries of the region. Though Tanzanian by upbringing, and currently residing in Canada, Vassanji was born in Kenya, which explains his exploration of the Mau Mau uprising in *The Gunny Sack* and *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003). Though born in Kenya, Bahadur Tejani was once a Ugandan citizen,

which would explain why his novel *Day After Tomorrow* is set in Uganda. As Tejani himself was to comment upon his expulsion from Uganda in 1972:

> We Asians are the true heirs of the dead East Africa. As children we knew Nairobi, Dar es Salaam, and Kampala. Nairobi was just a hitchhiker's ride away from us Kampala boys; from there we would dream of the ocean and the girls at Mombasa. The itch to travel, to see for yourself, has always been with us.[44]

The wandering that Tejani speaks of has been seriously curtailed by processes of nation-formation (and the establishment of rigid immigration laws), and the varying social and political experiences of the three countries in the region since independence, for example, war and military dictatorship in Uganda, *Ujamaa* in Tanzania, the Zanzibari revolution, and the rhetoric of free-market capitalism and liberal democracy by the Kenyan state. Nonetheless, the works that I consider in this book draw attention to the old East Africa.

Although it is one of many tags that can be attached to the writers under scrutiny, I have chosen to focus on the East African context precisely because the Asians' claims to belonging in the region have historically been denied or denigrated, as the earlier parts of this introduction shows. The Indians have often been labeled as "birds of passage" or "paper citizens" whose professed attachment to the countries of their adoption is a ruse for further economic exploitation.[45] Even commentators with no hostility towards the Indians have perpetuated the idea that they do not belong in East Africa, as Bharati does in the introduction to his anthropology, *The Asians in East Africa*, in which he claims that his is "*not* an Africanist study" but "that of a transplanted Indian society."[46] In his title, it is crucial that Bharati does not speak of the Asians *of* East Africa, Asian East Africans, or even East African Asians, but of the Asians *in* East Africa. Because of their "triple heritage," writers of Indian origin—even those who have committed to their adopted homelands—have frequently been met with rejection.[47] Arun Mukherjee has commented about how the Canadian literary establishment has found it difficult to accept Vassanji as part of Canadian literature. In her words, "he is not hot in Canada."[48] Vassanji himself writes about how, having been labeled as "immigrants," the relative invisibility of non-white Canadian writers is casually rationalized: "The term is . . . used somewhat condescendingly to describe a transition stage of no vital importance, a stage of growing up which we all have to go through before maturity." For such critics, "a writer matures when he begins to talk of his 'Canadian experience'."[49] In addition to the hostility of Canadian critics, Vassanji has also complained of not having "a whole gang of supporters in African Studies Departments."[50]

Quite clearly, writers such as Vassanji have had to occupy a limbo, a transitional state which, though valorized within post-colonial theory and

postmodernism, can either spell invisibility or lead to premature celebrations of "insurgent post-nationalism" on the part of critics. Although it is important to recognize the value that accrues to writers who occupy liminal spaces in metropolitan Western sites, it is equally useful to place their writings within the matrix of Third World literary debates, which is what this book attempts. While it might be useful to consider the writers in relation to a generalized "post-colonial condition," it is also important to consider the more specific and local historical referents that are routinely lost in such expansive studies. For instance, the process of nation-formation in East Africa, which many of the key texts under study reflect upon, cannot be properly understood without a keen investigation of the political history of the region. It is only by paying attention to such detail that the generalizations of post-colonial literary criticism might be avoided. In taking this view, I draw my cue from Simon Gikandi, who in an essay entitled "Reading the Referent" notes that post-colonial literary theory in North American academies has tended to spurn Third World texts produced in the heydays of nationalism and decolonization (1895–1960) in favor of post-colonial narratives concerned with the conditions of migrant subjects and writers in the West.[51] In this obsession with migrants in metropolitan sites, the meanings of everyday life in the postcolony and the epistemologies that undergird that life are given short shrift. Gikandi therefore calls for post-colonial reading practices that engage more directly with the politics of the postcolony and not simply the peregrinations of narcissistic metropolitan theorizing. I take my second cue from Tejaswini Niranjana who, in a study of the musical cultures of Indo-Trinidadian migrants, calls for comparativist reading practices that do not bypass the histories of Third World sites in the name of a new globalization. The source of Niranjana's concern is the contemporary deployment of the figure of the "Indian" in the context of "a self-congratulatory [Indian] cultural nationalism":

> At the end of the millennium . . . the Indian is not simply another postcolonial but one who would claim to have attained exceptionality or special status, an achievement that increasingly sets him off from inhabitants of other post-colonies. Earlier axes of identification are transformed and old solidarities disavowed as the middle class Indian, even as she vociferously asserts her cultural difference, becomes a crucial relay in the circuits of multinational capital.[52]

In responding to Niranjana's challenge, this book returns figures of Indian migration to the hard, and often awkward, scenes of empire and the postcolony, where some of the more ambitious theoretical claims of "migration as insurgency" are not as secure as they may look at first: the world of *Otieno Achach*, impossible romances, *dukawallah* stereotypes, a world of enchanting but elusive commodities.

Chapter 1 is a critical summary of the theoretical debates about homeliness, displacement and marginality, and a consideration of the relevance of those categories to the experiences of East African Asians. It also examines the pleasures and burdens of exile, ranging from Tejani's desire for belonging in Africa to Vassanji's ideal of in-betweenness. The chapter is a critical reading of what Ahmad calls "ideologies of immigration" and how they play out in East African Asian writing.[53] Chapter 2 reads *Dream Half-Expressed*, the autobiography of Nanji Kalidas Mehta, the pioneer Indian agricultural industrialist in East Africa, who sought to project himself as a restless person, infected with an inquisitiveness that in the end made him knowledgeable, tolerant, wealthy and part of a world much larger than the one he knew when he first ventured from Gujarat to East Africa in 1900. The chapter shows how his travels, especially in East Africa and the Indian Ocean islands, came to shape his sense of belonging and his hopes for India and its possible future, especially in regard to the vexed questions of culture and community. It ends with a brief reflection on how the study of itinerant lives might yield insights into Indian and African pasts. Chapter 3 covers the autobiographies of Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, Jameela Siddiqi's first novel *The Feast of the Nine Virgins* and Vassanji's second novel, *No New Land*, showing how food mediates the experience of migration. It encodes histories of resistance, accommodation and cultural exchange, acting in the process as an inscription of memory in material form. Chapter 4 considers how the diasporic imaging of Africa comes to constitute a sense of Indianness overseas. The chapter shows how images of Africa—many of them gendered—function in the immigrants' construction of "domestic" zones of safety and familiarity. Drawing on Said's notion of "Orientalism" the chapter shows how processes of racialization and ethnic formation in the literature depend on the anxieties and moral panics caused by the encounter with the African Other.

Chapter 5 deliberates on the use of gender categories and domesticity in the production of a diasporic sense of community. The argument here is that the production of migrant ethnicity depends not only on representations of the "outside," but also on the policing of the "inside." If diasporic cultural nationalism assumes a heterosexual subject who guarantees the reproduction of community in predictable ways, I show how the queer texts such as Shailja Patel's *Migritude* and Ghalib Shiraz Dhalla's *Ode to Lata* rescript desire as they search for a language that would name an Afro-Asian queer politic.

Students of East African culture of both the colonial and post-colonial periods will be familiar with many material and immaterial artefacts, naturalized in East Africa, whose origins lie in the Indian sub-continent. The distinctive dress for which Ugandan women are famous—the *Gomezi*—is, in spite of its Victorian look, originally designed by a Goan tailor named Gomez. The languages of East Africa today are littered with words of Indian origin: *dhobi* for

laundry; *landhies* for high density housing-lines for workers; *rupia* (derived from *rupees*) for money especially for the generation that grew up in the colonial period; *dukas* for shops; *ghari* for wheeled vehicles, and so on. It is also clear that the cultural traffic has not run in only one direction, for the East African experience has had a profound impact on the cultural outlook of the Indians in Africa and the Indian sub-continent too. Yet mutual suspicion between "Africans" and "Indians" has persisted, with cultural difference routinely offered as an explanation for the conflict. In Chapter 6, the book therefore turns its attention to the way in which Tejani and Vassanji deal with "miscegenation" in its cultural and racial senses. Chapter 7 turns its attention to how Jagjit Singh and Kuldip Sondhi narrate decolonization in East Africa, especially their depiction of African nationalism. I argue that the middle-tier position that the Asians occupied during the colonial period, and the pervasive acceptance of the colonial order in their midst, partly accounts for their general unease with decolonization, which all the authors reflect upon. I begin with Singh, who is particularly fascinating for the way he examines the notion of "the nation-as-one," or the nation as an entity that is suspicious of multiplicity and contradiction. Finally, Chapter 8 focuses on Vassanji's preoccupation with the past and its possible recovery in narrative, against a background of the dislocation of his Shamsi characters. I argue that memory serves to counter loss, but that this restorative function is complicated by the fact that Vassanji's historical quests are metafictional. He may value the past, but he is also deeply conscious that he cannot recover it except through the refracting medium of narration. The chapter seeks a historical explanation for the crisis of historical representation in Vassanji, not only by considering the influence of recent theories of history on his work, but also by thinking about how the East African context itself might provide clues to his doubts about edifices of history.

# 1
# The Pleasures and Tribulations of Migration

The sense of displacement and estrangement that assails migrants and diasporas is one of the most enduring subjects of East African Asian fiction, which presents images of wandering through strange territory, flight from undesirable homes, expulsions from spaces held dear, the scattering of communities and attempts to restore a sense of wholeness amidst the threat of alienation. The figure of an exiled Indian narrator from a Third World country writing out the story of his dislocation in his bleak dwelling in a European or North American city, a figure popularized by V. S. Naipaul in *The Mimic Men* (1967), appears several times in this body of fiction. So does the figure of the sojourner in a hostile African terrain, or lonely merchants in isolated trading outposts. The three writers under study in this chapter, M. G. Vassanji, Bahadur Tejani and Peter Nazareth, have written about the multiple displacements of African Asians: their migration from India, alienated life within East Africa, and sometimes, eventual departure for Europe or North America where the sense of alienation continues.

In spite of this commonality, the three writers evince very different approaches to displacement, and in the process tell us a lot about changes in East African writing as a whole. The treatment of the theme of displacement in Tejani and Nazareth differs considerably from that of Vassanji, a difference that I account for by considering the intellectual and historical contexts in which their writing was conducted. While the novels of Tejani and Nazareth express the desire for national belonging in East African countries, Vassanji pursues a post-national ideal given the historical experience of Asian migrants under nationalist states. Whereas Tejani and Nazareth wrote during the first two decades of independence—the 1960s and 1970s—a period in which there was a general belief in the value of African nationalism, Vassanji only began to publish his works in the late 1980s, a time when African nationalist discourses had already been delegitimized. If Tejani and Nazareth toyed with the possible assimilation of the Asian diaspora into the melting pot of new national cultures, which were being nurtured in the early years of political independence, Vassanji's work expresses unease

about projects of nation-building in East Africa, while extolling the virtues and depicting the pain of remaining politically on the fence. Nonetheless, there are subtle differences in the approaches by Nazareth and Tejani. While Tejani's nationalism is of a romantic kind, Nazareth's is a more skeptical one, given its Marxist sensitivity to power relations within emergent nation-states. The key task in this chapter, in brief, is to account for these different stances on the question of migration, nationhood and alienation. In the process, I shed light on the contributions that Tejani, Nazareth and Vassanji have made to notions of exile and displacement, which remain central in the understanding of post-colonial culture in the twentieth century.

Exile and displacement have regularly cropped up in East African literature, expressing as they do the conditions brought upon the region by colonial modernity: a sense of fragmetation and loss which, in turn, feeds the quest for homes and homeliness. In the fiction of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, for instance, black leaders of the colonial period are often cast in the mould of biblical figures such as Moses or the Messiah. Ngugi's writing of the African experience of colonialism as a kind of exile drew heavily upon the Jewish model of diaspora, a result of his Christian education.[1] The nationalist yearning for a homeland, which Ngugi's work represents, and the melancholic mood that informs those works indicates that for him, homelessness is indeed a sad fate.

However, alongside the understanding of displacement as a dreadful punishment, a view has developed that the loss of a home might be a positive value. If, as Edward Said has observed, "[i]n premodern times banishment was a particularly dreadful punishment since it not only meant years of aimless wandering away from family and familiar places," those very qualities of homeliness for which the premoderns felt such a strong affinity have acquired a dubious reputation for many contemporary, especially post-modernist, intellectuals.[2] The very quality of marginality that had been the source of unhappiness for people of the ancient world has become a positive force in the lives of those that Eva Hoffman has named "the new nomads," the new cosmopolitans who refuse to sentimentalize the idea of home.[3] Within the ambit of much of post-colonial theory, exile and diaspora have become attractive positions from which to view the predicament of the contemporary world, with the nomad seen as offering unique insights into modernity and its aftermath. Exile has come to mean what Edward Said has termed "the state of not being fully adjusted," and a "dislike [for] the trappings of accommodation and national well-being."[4] Meanings of diaspora and exile have become a lot less tied to their origins in violence and oppression. As many critics of post-colonial literary theory have pointed out, exile and diaspora have been emptied of much of their earlier historical meanings to bear the burden of relatively less painful experiences of travel and migration.[5] In more daring usage, these terms have come to embody the human condition, as is captured in Hoffman's statement that exile is

"a universal experience," all of us "in some way, on some level [. . .] feel that they are in exile [. . .] We feel ejected from our first homes and landscapes, from childhood, from our first family romance, from our authentic self."[6] Alluring and powerful as such kinds of rhetorical gestures may be, they run the real risk of turning histories of expulsion and rejection into objects of word-games rid of much of their analytical value.

There is a sense in which the allure of exile within the culture of modernism and its complex heritage can be attributed to the belief that the centered models of culture and identity advanced by nationalism, and its rhetoric of tradition, imprison human potential. Embracing estrangement is thus viewed as an important step in transgressing the boundaries of national or ethnic culture. The revisionary and innovative quest for an aesthetic and a politics untrammelled by the force of habit, a pursuit that is associated primarily with literary modernism, seems to be the major motive behind the privileging of displacement. For writers, whose basic trade is, after all, the imagination, being thus estranged may have certain benefits. This is especially so in the case of metropolitan writers, as Iain Chambers has implied. Rid of the "single, homogenous point of view, that sense of perspective and critical distance, born in the Renaissance and triumphant in colonialism, imperialism and the rational version of modernity," the writer who embraces exile is able to develop new ways of looking at the world.[7]

It is clear that the disenchantment with the fictions of belonging, which is a key aspect of modernist and postmodernist criticism, cannot fully account for the salience of the idea of exile and marginality among writers from the former colonies, such as those of East Africa. Granted, the literary modernism of Anglo-American writers has resonated among a number of writers from formerly colonized countries, but this has not been a case of simple repetition. The adoption of the language of modernism by post-colonial writers is more properly attributed to colonialism, whose deracinating effects find a remote counterpart in the alienated nature of life in the modern metropolis, and the consequent attempts to invent tradition. Writers in the colonies have privileged the theme of exile, for it was already prominent within the modernist canon, but this was only possible because they were already witnesses to extreme forms of displacement and fragmentation in their immediate locales. As I argue, East African invocations of the figure of exile, though similar in certain senses to its cousins in metropolitan modernism, did not always follow the same trajectories. If, as Simon Gikandi has pointed out, the European avant-garde adopted "exile and its rhetoric as the gesture that, by individuating and universalizing artistic production, would also liberate the writer from his 'compromised' literary traditions," East African writing often took quite a different approach.[8] The recognition of exile in the writer's past and present was merely a prelude to a restoration of the nation; alienation only served as an impetus to corrective action and was rarely ever embraced as a positive end in itself. In his essays in *Homecoming*,

Ngugi wa Thiongo, to cite a major East African example, may have celebrated the exile figure as one "who lives closer to God . . . and because of his suffering [. . . ] has attained [. . . ] wisdom," but he was quick to point out that such wisdom would give the exile "strength to await his deliverance and his return home from exile."[9] Like the mythical traveler-hero who travels to unknown worlds, the exile was duty-bound to make a triumphant return home: exile was merely a starting point and not a final destination. The feeling of exile engendered by colonial education was only crucial to the extent that it opened the eyes of the colonized subject to the contradictions of colonialism. This belief is clearly seen in Ngugi's fiction, in which the more earthy and unalienated figures act as counterpoints and strong alternatives to the positions taken by alienated, intellectual characters.[10]

Chris Wanjala's collection of essays, *For Home and Freedom*, reflects well the kind of hostility with which the adoption of an exilic subjectivity was met. Though conceding that the writer Taban lo Liyong had indeed attempted to name and thus to master his alienation as a colonial subject, Wanjala felt that the latter's embrace of cultural displacement was a sign of his "inability to change the *status quo*."[11] For Wanjala, the deracinating situation in which the writer was caught up was certainly changeable, and the acceptance of the self's estrangement was therefore a mere failure of will. Whereas other East African writers, such as Okot p'Bitek, made optimistic attempts to forge links with the culture of the popular majorities, Wanjala felt that lo Liyong was seen to be content in "the very alienation in which he [was] enmeshed."[12] This determined assault on the work of lo Liyong was limited because it assumed that East African writing needed to proceed in only one direction: that of cultural nationalism. To the extent that lo Liyong repudiated the central tenets of cultural nationalism, he was seen as a self-dramatizing purveyor of an imported aesthetic. Indeed, his Nietzschean vision of contradiction as a tool for self-transcending enhancement and freedom seemed strange from a nationalist viewpoint. Faced with the cultural fragmentation in the colonial scene, with its conflicting array of cultures and histories, lo Liyong saw his duty, not as one of marshalling the strength to build a unified whole, but as the courage to accept a shattered cultural image. To refute the quest for wholeness was to reject the genealogical preoccupations of cultural nationalism, a gesture that can be seen in lo Liyong's famous celebration of his father's death. By expressing glee at his own orphanhood, he sought to convey that he was now free to pursue his art, without any of the impediments of tradition: "And with his death is removed that ruling against my studying art . . . English was thenceforth my major."[13]

Yet, the negative reaction to lo Liyong's cult of alienation was not entirely misinformed, for African people had not been, in the words of George Lamming, "wholly severed from the cradle of a continuous culture and tradition" like the Caribbeans.[14] The attempt by African writers to proclaim their cultural orphanhood would therefore have seemed like an affectation or,

worse, a sign of elitist indulgence. Pitted against the clamour for "commitment" to nation-building that dominated the East African literary scene for close to thirty years after independence, the assumption of cultural orphanhood as a site for creativity seemed wastefully bohemian. The challenge for the "committed" writer was not to expand the imagination merely for art's sake, but to seek to close the gap between imagination and politics—and reining in the imagination would be the first step in bridging that gap. The poetics of estrangement and defamiliarization were looked at with great suspicion as impediments to the more serious business of grappling with the realities of the nation.[15]

Yet, to ignore the power of alienation as an important factor in colonial and post-colonial society is to be blind to an important reality. It might indeed have been, as George Lamming observed, that colonialism had not been devastating to African cultures in the same way that slavery had been in the case of the Caribbean, but he still recognized that "To be colonial is to be in a state of exile. And the exile is always colonial by circumstances."[16] But, whatever the connections that East African writers still had with "the cradle of a continuous culture," they could not simply adopt the position of cultural insiders without a wilful blindness to the realities of colonialism. It is indeed a measure of the changes that were taking place in colonial East African societies that some of the first novels in African languages, namely, Okot p'Bitek's *Lak Tar* (1953) and Gakaara wa Wanjau's *Uhoro wa Ugurani* (1946; the Gikuyu title translates as 'Marriage Procedures'), both dealt with the difficulties faced by young men in their attempts to raise bridewealth. The cultural vocabulary of these two novels may have seemed comfortably traditional, but a closer look would have shown that the crises the novels thematize took place against the background of migrant labor and an increasingly austere cash economy. These crises led to moral panics, which—according to John Lonsdale—were at the root of anti-colonial agitation and ethnic nationalisms in the post-war years.[17] The point here is that paying attention to displacement and estrangement is perhaps the best way of starting a discussion of modern East African literatures. At a superficial glance, the experiences of East African Asians may seem far removed from those of the Africans of the region. Yet, to concede to such a view is to ignore the realities of modern East Africa as a whole. This point can be illustrated by noting that if the "Asians" were regarded as strangers among "African" peoples, the realities of the modern, polyglot African nation suggested otherwise. In what was one of the twentieth century's most audacious examples of social engineering, Africans of diverse histories and cultures were brought together under the wing of colonial territories and, later, nation-states. Quite clearly, the modern nation-state in East Africa is made up of strangers, whose multiple solitudes are only disguised through conscious acts of imagining national communities. Putting East African Asians, who have traditionally played the role of African nationalism's "Other," at the core of the debate

on how the East African nations are narrated is thus a way of laying bare the means of nation-formation. It also calls to attention the uncertain futures of national ideologies, such as those of East Africa, that have had to reconcile the demands of integration with the imperatives of ethnicity. In some important ways, the story of the East African Asians is simply a contraction of the larger East African story—a regional history in small print. The Asians might appear distinct because of the enduring discourse of race, which was given solidity by colonial policies of social engineering, but their story is replicated many times in the history of East African people as a whole. In their strangeness, they act as a reminder of just how distant the rhetoric of nationalism can be from the details of everyday life. The presence of migrants acts as a reminder of the strangeness that the nation would want to subsume within its unisonant message, what Iain Chambers calls "the self-reflexive national idiom and its xenophobic refusal of external referents in its formation."[18] For Homi Bhabha, the hostility that the nation directs at its "others" is ultimately a declaration of war on its own realities, a maiming of its own image. Jealous of their difference, migrants "can never let the national history look at itself narcissitically in the eye" and their story helps to cast into sharp relief the fact that the nation is but an artifice.[19]

## The pleasures of xenophilia: "Culture" as exile in Bahadur Tejani

In an act of self-reflexivity in the epilogue to *Day After Tomorrow* (1971), the Ugandan writer Bahadur Tejani calls attention to his own literary attempt to examine the alienation of East African communities caught up in cultural insularity. That Tejani resorts to direct authorial commentary in the epilogue indicates his frustration with the mutual estrangement of black and Asian East African cultural communities, and his fear that his quest to reverse this trend would end up in failure. This sense of doubt most likely springs from Tejani's recognition that the daring fictional portrait of romance between an Asian man and an African woman that he draws in the novel is contradicted by the persistence of racial hostilities in East Africa at the time. In decrying what he sees as the indifference of his East African readers, Tejani draws attention to his own feeling of isolation, even as he criticizes those who are isolated by their belief in cultural purity. The epilogue also reflects Tejani's fear that fashioning new realities through literature may be futile, in a context in which the sedimented prejudices of colonialism carry far more weight than the lone efforts of a novelist. He may want, in his expansive, humanist style, to censure those who choose cultural isolation, but finds himself faced with the reality that his critical stance will mean his estrangement from East African readers. If the Asian communities of Uganda were already isolated from the mainstream flow of Ugandan life, Tejani's status as a writer seems

to have added an extra dimension to his sense of displacement as an Asian—hence his quest for "the educated conscience" that would affirm his position and lighten the burden of his ethical mission.[20]

It is instructive that Tejani invokes the authority of the American myth of a "melting pot" to balance what he regards as a perverted ideology of "multi-racialism" that wielded some force in East Africa during the years of decolonization (*Day After Tomorrow*, 141). Multi-racialism, as propounded by European settler and Indian communities in the waning years of colonialism, meant simply that the different racial groups would be accorded some measure of autonomy within the new structures of the independent states.[21] It was, in essence, a policy of separateness predicated on what Tejani calls differences "in culture, colour and creed, Sexual habits, diet, language, humour, work attitudes, family relations, recreation, ideas of planning and growth" (*Day After Tomorrow*, 142). Against this, Tejani favors an assimilationist, nationalist ideology, such as that pursued in the United States, which advocates for the integration of immigrants into the mainstream of a singular, hybrid culture. By launching into a strong denunciation of Asian isolationism in *Day After Tomorrow*, Tejani is implicitly questioning the exaggerated feelings of exile that prevents the Asian diaspora from developing a sense of belonging in East Africa. He invokes humanist universalism to counter the sense of displacement that leads the diaspora to reify Indian culture, thus prevents them from fully belonging in their East African abode. He does not accept the marginality of exilic or diasporic communities, depicting marginality as an affliction that only assimilation would cure. If the literature of immigration and exile is replete with images of baggage, "cultural knapsacks" according to Rosemary George, Tejani views such baggage as an unnecessary encumbrance, for it only impedes the immigrant's sense of belonging in the new spaces.[22]

*Day After Tomorrow* is a frontier novel set in the contact zones between the Indian merchants (the "Wepari") and the Africans whom they encounter in the course of their itinerant lives in East Africa. Tejani depicts the moments of contact as ones of heightened tension and fear, but is at pains to show that such fear is the product of an inability to understand and assimilate the new. However, a strong refutation of this fear is posed by the protagonist of the novel, Samsher. Born to an Indian merchant family at a trading village in Maasailand, Tanzania, Samsher grows up in the knowledge that his whole life will revolve around the family shop. The aspirational tendency of Wepari culture leads to a monomania for trading and a disregard for any other pursuits. So overwhelming is the focus on profit that the shop becomes, in Samsher's view, "a kind of barricade against humanity" (8). This mental seclusion is embodied in the fortress-like architecture of the shop, which fills Samsher with the visceral fear of being imprisoned. If commerce provides sustenance in an austere colonial world, it also prevents the merchant families from cultivating any other kinds of relations with fellow human beings.

The sense of alienation that arises from the reduction of human relations to their cash-value only serves to accentuate the feeling of estrangement fostered in the earlier moment of migration. Tejani depicts this money-fetish as being especially strong among the older generation of the merchants, those in whom memories of earlier poverty and deprivation have created a lingering fear of poverty.

However, the Wepari are not merely saddled by memories of past suffering. Having left India with dreams of a better life in Africa, they are consumed by a fear which leads them to marshall cultural memory as an antidote to deracination. On the one hand, Africa presents an array of sensual possibilities, reflected in Samsher's observation that whereas the Wepari traditionally "despised the body, [in Africa] they felt a call in the blood: of the black African to the brown Indian" (7–8). On the other hand, the possibility of contact with people outside their immediate kinship circles fills them with the dread of cultural dissolution. Life on the frontier heightens the knowledge that the claims of cultural identity rest on fairly shaky foundations. It undermines the insiderist proclivity for viewing one's own culture as containing self-evident virtues. In one notable passage in the novel, Tejani depicts the consternation of the Wepari when the Africans fail to recognize the universality of Indian culture: "the natives of the land could not easily accept the spirit of their vastly older civilization with its strange introvertedness, its gurgling sound of a language, its different habits of living" (33). Faced with their own Otherness in a new land, the Wepari compensate by fashioning even more elaborate myths of origin so that even if they are "torn from limb to limb . . . a small corner within [the self] would still hold itself intact" (8). This conservative trait is not merely a sentimental reaction to displacement. More than anything else, to bear the burden of the past is to carry a treasure trove of communal culture that makes it possible for the community to reproduce itself in new locations. If the carrying of cultural luggage facilitates the reproduction of community, it also prevents the Wepari from relating to Africans in terms other than those defined from their own vantage points. The consequence of importing a home in this absolute manner is that Africa remains largely unknown to the Wepari, who consequently live in fear of the black peasants. This feeling of isolation is given expression through the image of menacing darkness that pervades the novel.

Whereas the older members of the Wepari community continue to invest a great deal in the reproduction of a fortress-like culture, the younger members of the community like the protagonist, Samsher, are often doubtful about what they see as their elders' imprisonment in the past and their obsession with economic security. This difference provides the central point of conflict in the novel. Tejani suggests that, in spite of its apparent obsession with conserving the Indian past, Wepari culture is indeed a perversion of that past. Its austere and materialistic outlook is in stark contrast to the world of Indian epics that Samsher encounters in the course of his reading. Samsher

concludes that the Wepari, with over-regulated lives and over-integrated notions of cultural identity, lack the capacity to imagine themselves as different from what they already are. For this reason, they remain strangers everywhere but in the homes they have created. In fact, they are too deeply "at home" to be aware of any other ways of being and belonging.

Confronted with the Otherness of the Wepari in East Africa, Samsher does not launch into a compensatory celebration of his Wepari origins, but chooses instead to embrace the native African culture that ostensibly poses a threat to his sense of self. Given the manicheism that defines inter-racial relations in the novel, his embrace of the idea of Africa marks him as a self-hating Wepari. To the xenophobia of his Wepari elders, Samsher answers with a xenophilia whose chief object is Africa. The key premise behind his xenophilia and the consequent desire for assimilation is the view that the culture of the immigrants is too elaborate to encourage the sort of spontaneity that he associates with true humanity. He is lured from his own people by "the call of nature, transferred by natural people," and in the process gains "an energy that was alien to his race" (57). By relating with African people, he hopes to acquire what he regards as their easy communion with the natural world. For Samsher, the self-conscious culturedness of the Wepari only means that they have been estranged from their status as beings in the natural world.

But how are readers to interpret the idyllic images of Africa that Tejani juxtaposes to the "unnatural" Wepari culture? Do we conceive of the cultural gulf, suggested by the contrast, as the product of Tejani's own mental dislocation, rather than an essential character of the different cultures he portrays? Should we regard it as the romanticism of an author whose alienation from Africa takes on the character of an exaggerated love? Or do we dismiss it as yet another variation of Rousseau's myth of the "noble savage"? Indeed, these pictures of unalienated African life are part of a long Western intellectual tradition in which Africa has served as the negation of modern progress and its twin, alienation. However, it is also crucial to remember that the intellectual milieu in which Tejani wrote *Day After Tomorrow* was deeply informed by African cultural nationalism. To the European charge of African savagery, anti-colonial intellectuals of a nationalist persuasion answered with strong declarations of African humanity, sometimes insisting that African culture was more humane than the alienated European one. This tendency was especially strong within the Negritude movement, whose assumptions are reflected in Tejani's novel.[23] Tejani's embrace of Negritude in an attempt to grapple with the condition of exile is not surprising if we consider that Negritude itself was a movement born in, and of, exile. The black Parisian intellectuals who founded the movement turned to the idea of blackness not only as a response to the marginal position of black people in the world of colonialism, but also as an attempt to reverse the condition of alienation that they saw as a blight inflicted on humanity by modernity.[24]

On the one hand, Negritude was an attempt to address the sense of exile caused by slavery and colonialism; on the other, it was a challenge to the prevalent notion of culture as the negation of nature.

The portrait of the Wepari that Tejani draws is one of a people whose culture is so elaborate that they have lost a sense of themselves as natural beings. This over-culturedness, within the novel's scheme, leads to a kind of exile that echoes the myth of Eden. Shorn of their sensual freedoms, adherents of Wepari culture are alienated not only from themselves but also from the black people whom they meet in East Africa. So long is the history of Wepari denial of the body that Samsher envies local Africans for their lack of shame and their attachment to the natural landscape, a "mysterious power which made them completely at home in their environment" (15). This notion of Africans as the people of Eden is a way through which the novel speaks about the estrangement of the Indians from their new abode. But the kind of binarism expressed here, in which Africans serve as the cultural opposite of Indians, is problematic for one major reason. It could be argued that the African idyll is more a reflection of the author's own feeling of exile than an attribute of African life. While it might not be helpful to read Tejani's binarism automatically as evidence of a discredited neo-primitivism—for it might indeed be proved, for instance, that there is a great deal more sexual freedom in certain African cultures than in certain Indian ones—it is misleading, nonetheless, to suggest the absence of prohibitions within African cultures, whether of the pre-colonial or colonial periods. If anything, Tejani's idyllic portrait of Africa shows just how much he is exiled from Africa and its realities, in much the same way that Negritude itself was a symptom of the cultural dislocation caused by colonialism.[25] The xenophilia of the text testifies not to a consummation of the desire for belonging, but to the writer's fear that a gap still remains between him and the object of desire.

It is because of Tejani's own uncertainty about his subject that he adopts allegory as a mode for exploring the deep social contradictions in the East Africa of the time. Faced with intractable social tensions, he opts for a narrative that provides a neat diagnosis and an equally neat resolution. The novel's central problem and its ending are indeed very simple. Samsher grows to dislike the culture of his people that keeps them isolated from the Africans. He escapes the grip of his community by abandoning his work as a shopkeeper and becoming a teacher, something that is unusual among the Wepari. In the course of his rebellion, he gets an opportunity to explore the sensual pleasures for which he has always envied the Africans. However, his adventures with African prostitutes cause him much guilt, which is only assuaged when he meets Nanziri, the Ganda nurse, with whom he is able to cultivate a mutually enriching romance. In the end, they have a baby, who represents "a new civilization" beyond racial parochialism (6). As in most allegories, the outline of the problem is rendered in a stark fashion, and social complexity is lost in the attempt to draw bold outlines. Within the

novel's allegorical scheme, the contradictions between Indians and Africans are displaced onto the terrain of romance in which they find immediate resolution. Nanziri and Samsher, though individuals with their own personal histories, represent the social forces at the heart of the drive towards "a new civilization." This allegorical scheme is undermined by Tejani's own admission in the "Epilogue" that, for East African readers, the romance at the heart of the novel represents an impossible ideal, or, at best, an exception that confirms the rule.

*Day After Tomorrow* is a daringly utopian novel, but its embrace of Africa—which acts as a figure of authentic, unalienated humanity—can be read as an evasion. In the novel, Africa functions as a negation of modernity and over-civilization, an example of how to be cultured while not estranged from one's own nature. There are many possible sources of this kind of portrayal: African cultural nationalism, and its dominance in East African literary scholarship at the time of the novel's scripting; primitivism and its many permutations; or even Tejani's own estrangement both as an intellectual and an Asian African. Having cast Africa in the role of Eden, Tejani recommends assimilation to the Asian African as the only way to end the sense of exile. Samsher refuses to maintain a double-allegiance that would serve as an acknowledgement of his dual heritage, in order to fulfill what seems to be a nationalist desire for singularity. The cause of my doubt about the novel's panacea to exile is its vision of Africa, for it embodies what Timothy Weiss would call "an aesthetic withdrawal, not a historical moment."[26] Tejani merely substitutes his own dislocation with escapism, a withdrawal into the idyllic that in the end submerges the history of conflict and dislocation that the novel would like to address in the first place. Nonetheless, *Day After Tomorrow* is still an important text, for it raises questions which are later taken up in the more ambitious novels of Moyez Vassanji and Peter Nazareth, to whom I now turn.

## Peter Nazareth and the Ugandan expulsions

Like its kindred narrative, V. S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*,[27] Peter Nazareth's *In a Brown Mantle* is both fictional autobiography, and colonial and post-colonial history.[28] Joseph Deogratius D'Souza, the protagonist of the novel, recounts his life in Damibia—Nazareth's fictional name for Uganda—from the vantage point of his exile in London. The immediate trigger for his memoirs is the attempted assassination of his former friend and political compatriot, Robert Kyeyune, the Prime Minister of Damibia. He recounts episodes from his personal life, the history of the Goan presence in the country, his participation in the country's independence movement, and his brief career as Kyeyune's aide after independence. When D'Souza realizes that African independence has led to a dead-end—a failure that is given its most poignant expression in the political assassination of Pius Cota, the socialist

Goan politician from neighboring Azingwe (Kenya)—he decides to become corrupt like other politicians and uses his influential position to draw bribes from Indian businessmen. Although D'Souza is mainly preoccupied with what went wrong with Damibia's independence movement, in his recollections he also contemplates the dislocated lives of Asian migrants in East Africa, his bitter separation from Damibia—the country of his birth—and the unbearable nature of his life in England.

Unlike Ralph Singh, the protagonist of *The Mimic Men*, who flees the island of Isabella for London not only because of post-colonial failure, but also in pursuit of a bookish, romantic vision of England, D'Souza is driven there solely by the unbearable political situation in Damibia. Unlike Singh, whose sense of exile is almost total—in the sense that his colonial education estranges him from Isabella and that his romantic vision alienates him from the "real" England—D'Souza feels a strong affinity for Damibia and thus perceives his relocation as a loss. His sense of being extracted from something of value is not so much a general post-colonial condition, as in the case of Naipaul Singh's, as much as a result of the failure of national liberation. He does not feel the existentialist estrangement from all places that we see in Naipaul's anti-heroes; rather, it is his attachment to Damibia, and his frustrated love for it, that drives him to exile. His feeling of loss once he leaves Damibia for London has a strong, visceral quality, for he opens his narration by mentioning the coldness that envelopes his dingy flat, and the coins that he has to feed into the metered electric heater in order to keep himself warm.[29] Whereas Naipaul would, in his usual fashion, cringe at any sign of what he would consider as tropical excess—carnival, calypso and reggae—D'Souza obviously longs for the scenes of revelry and camaraderie which he has left behind. In London, he feels lonely in a way that he never did in Africa, like a piece of "driftwood" (101). The strong sense of natal alienation expressed in his parting words as his London-bound flight lifts off—"Goodbye, Mother Africa . . . Your bastard son loved you" (150)—points to his view that an essential link has been breached.

Prior to his exile in London, D'Souza believes that he can undo his sense of estrangement as a Goan-African by renouncing Goan ethnocentrism and through an active engagement in Damibian anti-colonial politics. But his exile in London throws him right back into the arms of the Goan community, which he had earlier renounced. He begins to feel that his own people are more genuine, elemental, as opposed to the studied civilities and hypocrisies of the English. Unlike Ralph Singh who, in keeping with Naipaul's bleak vision, cannot find an alternative to the loneliness of exile, D'Souza manages to rediscover a center that he had renounced while back in Damibia. However, exile in this instance reinforces the power of ethnicity and defeats the cosmopolitan yearning to be part of a larger human community. It forces D'Souza to substitute the adventurous attitude of his earlier

days—his defiance of communal norms and his cooperation with African nationalists—with a narrower concern for security and survival.

D'Souza's narrative explains the Goan concern with security by invoking their long history of subjugation to Hindu empire-builders, Muslim imperialists and the Portuguese. His view is that this history has bred in the Goans a culture of capitulation to authority, and with it the belief that their place in the world will always be marginal. Unable to set up their own national government in Goa, they decide to live on the margins of other nations, sometimes seeking assimilation into Portuguese and British culture, but always remaining a distinct minority. Bereft of the security that a state might provide, cultural conformity becomes the key way in which the Goans establish stability. This is accompanied by incessant wandering across the colonies, the consequence of which is a powerful sense of dislocation. It is this feeling of non-belonging that D'Souza seeks to reverse through his romantic liaisons with black Damibian women and his involvement in local nationalist politics. Like Tejani's protagonist, Samsher, who also represents a second generation of Asian migrants in East Africa, D'Souza's attempt to integrate into African life, and thus to end his exile, has strong Negritudist overtones, as can be seen in his descriptions of Damibian nightlife. Yet, even as he participates in these scenes of revelry and anti-colonial political activism, he is apprehensive that he cannot be accepted as a political leader. His old political compatriot Kyeyune tells him that the people "are not yet ready for an Asian Minister" having promised him a cabinet position in the days of anti-colonial struggle (81). After independence, he is continually reminded of his otherness by Gombe Kukwaya, the ultra-nationalist "big man" of Damibian politics with whom he has several altercations.

By partaking in the "New Jazz Nightclub" culture of unbridled sensuality and inter-racial conviviality, he claims Damibia as his home in opposition to the Goan patriarchs who maintain a romantic notion of Goa as the only true one. Nazareth presents D'Souza's quest as one that is doomed to end in failure. Any desire to trace his genealogy exclusively to Goa is cancelled out by his birth in Africa. Drawing a family tree turns out to be much more complicated than it first seems. D'Souza therefore adopts a critical attitude to the patriarchal quest for a restored homeland, and instead accepts his life as a reluctant wanderer. It is significant that he chooses to go to England and not Goa when the political situation in Damibia becomes inhospitable. Yet his scepticism about the patriarchal narrative of return does not exempt him from a sense of loss when he finally flees to London. Ultimately, he embraces the very Goan community that he had rejected earlier. His wavering in this regard could be consistent with the author's attempt to present him as an unreliable narrator whose views cannot be taken at face value. However, it is also important to recognize that the contradictions that Nazareth lays out in the narrative are too deep to

be reconciled. D'Souza might believe that his involvement with Damibian nationalist politics will solve his alienation, but Nazareth seems to suggest that the questions are too intractable for such a simple answer. The condition of exile, as Nazareth presents it, is characterized by a contradiction between desire and its inevitable frustration.

Exilic or diasporic communities are often caught in a kind of limbo, between the sites of extraction which still inform their sense of self and the new locations to which they owe an "ambivalent affiliation,"[30] between the desire to be at the center of powerful national narratives and the urge to provide alternative narratives to national genealogies. The work of Paul Gilroy, for instance, has been concerned with such antinomial tendencies within black cultures in Britain and the United States. Rejecting the black nationalist assertion of an organic and singular connection with Africa, and readings that erase slavery from the history of modernity, Gilroy argues instead for the presence of a black tradition of "antagonistic indebtedness" to Enlightenment, modernity, America and the Union Jack.[31] A similar situation is evident in Peter Nazareth's novels, which has prompted Peter Simatei to note that Nazareth "writes consciously as a Goan but with deep commitment to his African background, a relationship which he has seen as constituting a kind of dilemma."[32] Like Gilroy's black diaspora for whom imaginings of Africa cannot provide a sufficient basis for politics, Indian and Goan origins cannot fully explain the lives of Nazareth's characters, who are thus compelled to recognize their history in Africa. As John Scheckter provocatively argues,

> Identity in diaspora is transformational for Nazareth, and his figures must also be described as *mugoa* and *muhindi* (pl., *wagoa* and *wahindi*), Swahili labels which regularize their solid, visible presence in East Africa. That is, their Goan and Indian identities have already been reformulated by the time of the novels' openings, compounding new African identities that include origins elsewhere.[33]

As "translated" subjects, the Goans of East Africa cannot reasonably embrace a myth of restoration that defines Goa as the center to which a journey of return must be made; they also have to take into account their African presence as an important component of their selfhood. However, such an embrace of Africa cannot simply be a celebration of the insular and static notion of national culture advanced by African ultranationalists such as Gombe Kukwaya; rather, it is not saddled by the myth of a lost wholeness. In keeping with this versatile view of identity, Nazareth has stated in an essay on Goan writing that *In a Brown Mantle* "was part of African literature" and that he considered himself "to be primarily an African" at the time he wrote the novel. While recognizing his Goanness as a crucial component of his identity, he refuses to advance it as the sole basis of his sense of selfhood.

He remembers how his father declined to go back to Goa because he realized that his children were attached to their country of birth, Uganda.[34] In the same essay, Nazareth speaks of the contradiction

> between expecting home to remain an untouched paradise, on the one hand, and the reality of change on the other. In expecting home to remain untouched, we take on Western man's dreams, those that haunt, perhaps from medieval times: that out there is not exploitation but a simple paradise where one can unwind from the pressures of "civilization."[35]

Just as much as Goans would need to face up to the reality of living in Africa, so would Africans need to recognize that the meanings of Africa could not be ring-fenced through atavistic appeals to cultural purity:

> There is something curious about racial oppression. Those races that have suffered tend to idealise their past, to believe that before they were ruled or oppressed or exploited by another race, all was grand and glorious. They lived together like brothers and sisters, sharing everything, and were one big happy family.
>
> (*In a Brown Mantle*, 74)

D'Souza's comment is directed at the Goan and African communities, both of which are saddled by a sense of loss, having undergone the decentering experience of colonialism. He provides a warning against the belief that the feeling of exile can be reversed by a restoration of homeland and culture, one which leads to a xenophobic nationalism on the part of the Africans and a rejection of changed circumstances in the case of the Goans. For D'Souza, colonial fragmentation was preceded by cultural stability; rather, wholeness is an image born of the colonial crisis. For instance, he points to the history of African migrations which makes refute claims of autochthony that are used to exclude the immigrants from the Indian sub-continent. To Gombe Kukwaya's taunt that he should go back to Goa, he answers: "I'll go back to Goa the day you go back to the Congo. And the day all immigrant tribes in Africa move back to where they came from" (75). Nazareth presents a similar argument in his second novel, *The General Is Up*, in which the military dictator, who expels the East Indians and Goans from Damibia on the account that they are not citizens, is said to have been born across the border.[36] Nazareth's intention is not to argue for the inclusion of people into the nation-state on the basis of their places of birth, but to call attention to the shaky intellectual foundations of the rhetoric of autochthony, especially in a context in which borders have been arbitrarily drawn on the landscape. Against a politics with an undue focus on whether one is "indigenous" or otherwise, the novel suggests an alternative determinant for citizenship:

commitment to the public interest. For Nazareth, the basis for citizenship is not filiation (a mere inheritance, a circumstance of birth) but affiliation (a demonstration of commitment through work and an active identification with other citizens). Yet, as the rumour about the General's birth in a foreign country shows, identification of oneself as a citizen must not become a rejection of others on the basis of their foreign-ness, for, if we look hard enough, everyone is a foreigner. It is upon the recognition of this universal sense of foreign-ness that Nazareth's humanism is built.

## M. G. Vassanji: Migration and the ideal of in-betweenness

M. G. Vassanji has woven rich historical narratives of migration by Indian Muslims of the Shamsi sect who travel to German and British East Africa in the late nineteenth century to work as petty traders, semi-skilled laborers and junior colonial officers.[37] This places them in an intermediary role between the Africans and the Europeans. When the East African countries finally attain their independence, the Shamsis make a second voyage to North America and Europe. This second wave of migration is attributed to the political and economic changes that take place after independence and which threaten the privileges that the immigrants had enjoyed during the colonial period. In the odd case, characters journey back to East Africa from the metropolitan countries. Due to these wanderings, and the dislocations of colonialism, the Shamsi deal with a pervasive sense of uprootment, reflected in Vassanji's concern with home and belonging. The consequences of this history of migration are dramatized in the two novels that form the backbone of the discussion in this section: *The Gunny Sack* and *No New Land*.

The section addresses Vassanji's representation of the decentering experience of migration and the psychic dislocations of colonialism. Given the incessant movement that characterizes the lives of his Shamsi subjects, one of the most pressing questions in Vassanji's work is determining where their allegiances lie and where they belong. This question is important because, in spite of their embrace of a decentered, nomadic subjectivity, the Shamsis do indulge in a quest for wholeness and coherence. Indeed, this is one of the central ironies of Vassanji's fiction: the authorial desire to present his subjects as transnational cosmopolitans is accompanied by his recognition of their enduring investment in the comforts of ethnic belonging. Unlike Tejani and Nazareth, Vassanji's works are highly suspicious of the nationalist drive towards cultural unity. Although he celebrates cultural synthesis and hybridity, the idea of a national culture, with its connotation of obligatory conformity, is a cause for much anxiety in his works. It is for this reason that Rosemary Marangoly George has noted, in a discussion of *The Gunny Sack*, that "while immigrants disturb the easy interpellation of national subjects by a hegemonic national discourse, the very formulation of national projects such as 'Ujamaa' challenges, disturbs and threatens the immigrants'

project of 'being immigrants,' of remaining marginal, on the fence."[38] For Vassanji, the integration of immigrants into national cultures is acceptable as long as it takes place voluntarily, but becomes stifling if it is enforced by state bureaucracies and dominant cultural groups.

The salience of the national question in *The Gunny Sack* can be attributed to Vassanji's awareness that the problems that the Asian immigrants face in post-colonial East Africa have to do with their perceived political role in the colonial period. One of the main causes of this problem is the enduring stereotype that they have been politically apathetic, agitating for justice only when their immediate interests are threatened. For the nationalists who shared this view, independence would usher in the moment in which the Asians would face up to a colonial past of exploitation and political fence-sitting. Vassanji's narrator-protagonist Salim therefore devotes a part of his narrative to a refutation of this image of the immigrants. He shows how, in the early years of independence, many Shamsi youth are consumed by the heady optimism generated by Tanzanian nationalism. In order to express their support for the new nation, they don Mao-style "Kaunda suits" and chant slogans in support of President Julius Nyerere's socialist project, *Ujamaa*. However, Salim is doubtful of the sincerity of these gestures, for he depicts them as ruses that are eventually given up. In fact, in an early part of the narrative, in which he reflects upon the transition from German to British colonial rule in Tanganyika, Vassanji notes that immigrant culture places little value in the attachment to particular places: "Governments may come and go, but the immigrants' only concern is the security of their families, their trade and savings" (52). Rosemary George has perceptively argued that this passage refutes the view, which she associates with Homi Bhabha, that those who occupy the margins of the national identity—be they women, migrants or colonized people—are always subaltern. For George, the alienation of the Shamsi is not so much a product of their exclusion by a powerful national narrative as it is the choice of marginality as a desirable location: "Immigration, one could argue, *unwrites* nation and national projects because it flagrantly displays a rejection of one national space for another more desirable location, albeit with some luggage carried over."[39] Choosing marginality in this particular case then means choosing privilege, and reading one's own migrant location "as a positive, even superior stance from which to experience the modern nation."[40]

However, by presenting the Shamsis as content in their marginality, Vassanji reinforces the stereotype that they are insular and cynical when it comes to national politics, a charge that he has tried so hard to dispel in the rest of the novel. He implicates them in an inward-looking ethnic consciousness that was consistent with the colonial policy of segregation, but also maintains that such self-willed exclusion had positive dividends. One question that remains to be asked, as Neloufer de Mel suggests, is "the price paid, in material and epistemic terms, for such Otherness."[41] If the benefits of

self-willed alienation are to be enjoyed, then the burden of solitude and even hostility also has to be endured. Vassanji's narrator, Salim, does not seem to think so, for he projects the burden onto African nationalists: "Then there were *of course* the *demagogues* out to provoke reaction against the Asians. 'The Asians are not integrating enough!' thundered one. 'If you want to stay in Africa, you must learn to live with Africans . . . the days of your dukas are numbered!' " (162; emphasis added).

Although the fervent policing of the boundaries of racial and ethnic identification in *The Gunny Sack*, and the incessant defensiveness that accompanies it, are a product of the political vulnerability brought about by the immigrant's minority status in nationalism, it is still very much akin to the processes through which national myths are engendered. In spite of the doubts with which the diaspora in the novel receive the country's independence celebrations, the diaspora's own strategies are similar to the nationalistic narrative in their exclusivist modes of operation. If the nation is jealous of its borders, so is the immigrant community of its status as an ethnic group. Vassanji is highly aware of the positive value of ethnicity and is thus hesistant about discarding the category altogether. As such, he takes an antagonistic stance against nationalism, but only because nationalism desires the submergence of diasporic ethnicity. At the same time he is cognizant of how an over-developed sense of ethnic belonging can prevent individuals and groups from interacting positively with others unlike themselves, thus creating dangerous levels of hostility. Quite clearly, Vassanji's treatment of Shamsi culture is sandwiched between an ontological schema in which myths of Shamsi purity are refuted, and a more contextual approach in which the history of ethnic politics is acknowledged. The Shamsi may not exist as an immanent category, but their historical presence as a social entity, and the burden that comes with being a member of such an ethnic configuration, cannot merely be wished away. The memory work that goes into the making of the identity of the immigrants may be interrogated, but such interrogation does not preclude the recognition of identitarian claims. The immigrant is obligated to bear the burden of history to the same degree that he or she has little choice but to resist the strictures of that history. For Vassanji, ethnicity is therefore very much like nationalism, which an African character in Raymond William's novel *Second Generation* describes thus: "Nationalism is [. . .] like class. To have it, and to feel it, is the only way to end it. If you fail to claim it, or give it up too soon, you will merely be cheated by other classes and other nations."[42] What we have here, then, is a seesaw motion between principles that contradict each other, a dilemma that Vassanji declines to resolve, for doing so would be to override what he sees as life's essential ironies. In all of Vassanji's work, the structuring principle is invariably the tantalizing prospect of ecumenism and cosmopolitanism on the one hand, and a diasporic imaginary that always conjures an alluring ancestry on the other.

Whereas ethnic memory is necessary in *The Gunny Sack*, it is simultaneously presented as a burden. The contents of the gunny sack, given to Salim by Ji Bai, provide a window into a complicated mix of shameful and useable Shamsi histories, which Dhanji Govindji had hidden away from view in order that his family name would remain respectable. As Salim pursues his research into the history of his people, the Shamsis, he comes to realize that there is a price to be paid for the strategies that they have adopted in order to survive away from their original homeland. The closing of ranks that characterizes much of the Shamsi's engagement with those other than themselves is not merely a way of keeping communal secrets, and maintaining a sense of honor. As in Tejani's *Day After Tomorrow*, organizing on the basis of ethnicity provides an important social and economic safety net for vulnerable immigrant peoples. This is normally accompanied by a fastidious attention to communal history, whether real or imagined, as a basis for identity away from home. In immigrant expressive cultures, this concern with memory and identity is often expressed through the motif of luggage and other related objects such as heirlooms, family photographs and so on. The theme of diasporic cultural memory as a bothersome inheritance can be seen when Salim reports for paramilitary National Service at the remote little town of Kaboya with a big black trunk which "is family history, storage bin, a connection with home, and a way of keeping one's people away from the host country."[43] The sluggish pace to which the huge luggage reduces Salim when he arrives at the camp signals his failure to fit in the Tanzanian nation. The government demands that the migrants forget their pasts as a way of showing their loyalty to the emergent polity. However, they deliberately take a cautious stance about the new national culture for they feel cultural integration would spell the end of communal arrangements that have served them well.

Given the foregoing, the culture of the immigrants in *The Gunny Sack* could be said to exhibit what Tom Nairn has famously referred to as a "Janus-face," an ambivalence expressed in simultaneous acts of regression and progression, memory and forgetting, repetition and linearity.[44] This hesitation between extremes can be seen in Salim's disavowal of ethnic and racial belonging, and his continued desire for such affiliations. He would like to resist the allure of belonging because he realizes that he is already on the margins of the Shamsi community, but his alienation from black Africans frustrates this desire. Given his "outsider" status among the Shamsi (he is of both black and Shamsi ancestry) it comes as a surprise that upon arriving at Kaboya he goes to see the *mukhi* (the Shamsi communal leader in the town), an act that is reminiscent of what his ancestor Dhanji Govindji did nearly a century before upon his arrival in Africa. Contrary to expectation, Salim's miscegenated status does not free him from the pull of ethnicity; rather, it makes him even more vulnerable to its allure. It drives his quest for identity, for the Shamsi see him as one marked by an apparent void, a

breached connection. His decision to seek out the *mukhi* therefore highlights the ambivalent position that he occupies and also the regressive, cyclic and repetitive nature of immigrant history as Vassanji plots it.

Throughout the novel, Vassanji is anxious to show that the past is not a fait accompli, but rather, an endless territory. This undermines the elaborate fictions of coherence around which a Shamsi ethnic identity has emerged.[45] But the very image of the trunk, or the gunny sack, suggests finite contents that are the raw material of the community's history. The image of history as luggage can be interpreted as a notion of culture as the portable property of an individual, a group or as a finished product. It is this reification of ethnic history that the novel resists, even as it also performs a reifying function. This is the crux of my argument: that Vassanji's fiction is characterized by hesitation between a vision of change and the weight of heritage, a common belief in both "progress" and "tradition." If the luggage implies the instability of identity as it travels, the very enclosed nature of the trunk only emphasizes the relative imperviousness of that identity as it enters new environments.

As I hope to have shown in the preceding discussion, the contradictions in Shamsi attitudes to nationalism and to their host countries are associated with the conflicting demands imposed on them by their immigrant status. Nonetheless, these contradictions are also symptoms of the psychic splits engendered by the colonial experience. Indeed, exile in Vassanji takes two trajectories: the loss of familiarity wrought upon the immigrants by their migration, and the belief, promoted by their colonial tutelage, that culture and civilization are not to be found among colonized peoples. Exile in this instance takes the form of *metaphor*; it is no longer a sign of actual displacement, but a spiritual condition imposed on the subject by a history of cultural subjugation. Foremost among the factors that engender the psychic splits I have spoken about above is the pervasive myth of Englishness. It is significant that Vassanji returns several times to the theme of the English language: the key conduit for the purveying of the romance of England. Distanced from local realities by the ideology of Englishness, the Shamsi learn to see as exiles. English education makes it difficult for them to find a site of identity in their immediate East African surroundings—a cultural schizophrenia that Vassanji thematizes in much of his fiction. The centrality of the idea of Englishness in Vassanji's works is demonstrated by the currency placed by Shamsi parents on the acquisition of the English language and the recurrence of teachers of English in virtually all of his fiction.

In *Uhuru Street*, the theme is conveyed in the story "English Lessons," in which the "Eurasian" teacher, Mr Stuart, imagines a "Young England, of rolling hills, lush forests, and stately homes. Where character was taught in schools . . . honour and courage were not mere words" (59). Yet another teacher of English, Mr Richard Gregory, appears in the pages of Vassanji's third novel, *The Book of Secrets*.[46] However, in "English Lessons" and *The*

*Book of Secrets*, Vassanji seeks to upset the myth of old England through ironic reversals: Fletcher and Gregory—both Englishmen—act as bohemian, avant-garde counterpoints to the anachronistic Victorianisms that are still prevalent in the culture of the colonized country. In spite of this critique of colonial culture in these texts, Vassanji does not make strong denunciations of the role of English in the lives of colonized peoples, in the manner of Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Instead of an apocalyptic vision in which the colonial legacy is completely routed from the cultures of the colonized, Vassanji believes that post-colonial culture will always contain traces of that which precedes it. His challenge, as he sees it, is not to transcend colonialism, for that would mean escaping the scene of history altogether, but to understand, assimilate and subdue it. For Vassanji, this acceptance of an unchangeable history is necessary if the confrontation with exile is not to lapse into a millenarian quest for an ahistorical ideal. He is therefore unapologetic about his use of English as a medium of artistic expression, although his relation to it is still an ambivalent one. English comes to him laden with the baggage of colonialism, but becomes, upon its adoption by post-colonial subjects, a virtual Trojan horse: "if we were invaded, then I now see myself as part of an invading force, or part of an invading culture from the Third World which is now helping to transform the cultures that invaded us."[47] However, as Vassanji seems to realize, the process of assimilating and domesticating colonial culture is not as straightforward as it seems.

One of the enduring ironies of colonial education is that it prepared colonized subjects for roles that they could not actually take up; the desires that it aroused within the colonized were ultimately frustrated by the fact that colonial spaces were segregated. If colonial education helped incubate in the colonized subjects hope for inclusion in imperial culture, such hope was bound to be dashed because its consummation was reserved for a few on the basis of color. For the small class of colonized people who were privileged to have a formal, colonial education, this paradox often resulted in anti-colonial agitation. For the Shamsi, however, this central irony of colonial education is mitigated by their middle-tier status within the peripheries of empire, resulting in muted opposition to the colonial order and an enduring belief that colonialism was benign. The narrator of *No New Land* captures this belief well when he observes that: "The idea of empire was relinquished slowly in the Asian communities. Right up until independence, letters would arrive addressed ostensibly to someone in the 'British Empire' or 'British East Africa' " (22–23). When the moment of independence finally arrives, it finds the Shamsi still enchanted by the myths of empire and Englishness. It is for this reason, among others, that they undertake a second migration, from their adopted homeland in East Africa to North America and Europe.

Once the imperial power leaves Africa, it quickly becomes clear to the Shamsi that it is not the home that they imagined it would be. Indeed, the overwhelming feeling among them is that they have been abandoned.

One cannot read Sona's letters to Salim in *The Gunny Sack* and not appreciate his sentiment that the Shamsis are indeed "Britannia's children" (232). If Sona's description of his first encounter with England as a kind of homecoming seems odd, it is important to remember that it is a moment in which he attempts to reconcile the Victorian vision of order, gleaned from his English literature lessons, with a real place. Like the Caribbean protagonists of V.S. Naipaul's fiction, Sona has been unable to find in the East African landscape equivalents to the aesthetic ideals drawn in English literature. It is only at the moment of his encounter with England that he is able to confront the imaginary landscapes that have been such an integral part of his subjectivity. For those who were educated under colonialism, there was often a radical split between the elevated images they encountered in books and the stark realities of their situation as colonized peoples. This, more than anything else, would explain why Sona narrates his arrival in England as a homecoming, a moment of self-recognition in which he is ostensibly freed from spiritual exile and in which he is finally able to reconcile literary "words" and the "things" to which they refer.

However, Vassanji is too sceptical about the rhetoric of authenticity inherent in the myth of homecoming to allow for a happy denouement to Sona's quest. If there is a nagging sense that Sona's romantic celebration of the English landscape is naive and anachronistic, especially if we recall that the very things that he celebrates about London have been at the heart of the bleak urban visions of the Euro-American modernism, Vassanji is quick to remind us that the image of order that Sona relishes is underlain by a logic not inconsistent with colonial compartmentalization. Sona soon comes into confrontation with the reality of a resurgent racism in the wake of the migration of ex-colonial subjects to Britain. He realizes that the moment of arrival in the "mother country" is akin to the moment of African independence, for the Shamsis are made once again to face up to the reality of their exile. The images of geometric precision that had enchanted him upon arrival transform to symbols of bureaucratic tyranny; the naive acceptance of the Victorian vision of order gives way to a modernist disenchantment with the alienated nature of modernity. The narrative's undermining of Sona's over-optimistic reading of England as the end of exile acts as a figure for the more general Shamsi disenchantment with fictions of belonging. England emerges not as a thing-in-itself, but as a figure of fantasy that the Shamsi have erected as a bulwark against their alienated existence in East Africa. Soon, they come to a realization that their attempts at assimilation into England, or Canada for that matter, does not guarantee an end to exile any more than does a dogged persistence in any notion of an authentic Shamsi culture.

If the image of Shamsi immigration that I have drawn above appears convoluted, it is because Vassanji's narratives are invariably hinged on a paradoxical structuring principle: the optimism of his migrants about securing homes for themselves is undermined by a realization that there are

no homes to be found; their romantic investment in communal memory is tempered by the fact that they can only grasp at shards of memory; their eschatological hope for a final destination is counterbalanced by a dystopian distrust of narratives of liberation; and their quest for progress is frustrated by a cyclical history. Underlying the vision of progress is the hope that a promised land will be reached, and that there is an ideal city—an Amarapur—to which the diaspora may arrive. Within this reformist stance, the past is an unnecessary encumbrance, since to arrive at the promised city one needs to "travel light."[48] So, when the immigrants, especially the younger ones, arrive at a desired destination, the tendency is towards amnesia. Yet, forgetfulness does not necessarily bring about acceptance in the host country, thus complicating the exile's quest for a home. Nowhere else in Vassanji's fiction are these countervailing pressures on immigrant identity better demonstrated than in *No New Land*.[49]

Like *The Gunny Sack*, the central concern in *No New Land* is the place of memory in the rapidly changing world of the East African Asian immigrants. It is the story of the Lalanis, a family of Indian Muslims from Tanzania who have recently settled in Toronto, Canada, and of Nanji, a spiritually tortured, agnostic young man who befriends them. Much of the narrative is focalized through the perspective of Nurdin Lalani, who is faced with the false accusation that he has attempted to rape a young white woman whom he has actually tried to help. In spite of the false nature of the accusation, Nurdin is consumed by guilt, for he has coincidentally been tempted to stray from his strict Muslim upbringing by eating pork, watching pornography and having an extra-marital affair. The travails of the Lalanis are complemented by Nanji's ruminations about religion, his paralysis in the face of racism, and his inability to find love, among other existentialist themes of futility and anxiety. The sophisticated nature of Nanji's thinking acts as a narrative counterpoint to Nurdin's bewilderment in the face of a new cultural landscape. The last three chapters of the novel are mainly an account of how a measure of stability is restored to the Lalani family and to the larger East African Asian community by the arrival of Missionary, a religious leader who reconciles the immigrants to their situation.

The first epigraph to the novel, an extract from "The City," a poem by the Greek-Egyptian poet, C. P. Cavafy, resonates with an idea that is central to *The Gunny Sack*: the notion of memory as a burden, and exile as a fiction. The epigraph suggests that escape from one's past and from one's detested home is impossible, at least in a psychic sense. As Timothy Weiss has noted in a reading of Cavafy's poem, "the exile may wander the world yet always end up in the same place, because he carries with him, in his mind, his past and the city from which he has escaped physically but can never escape psychologically."[50] Memories from the former land will keep intruding into the exile's presence in the new land, creating a sense of dislocation: a disjuncture between the exile's vocabulary and the new experience

it seeks to capture. The old world, it is suggested, will follow the itinerant into the place of escape. Newness then remains a fiction. Reading *No New Land*, one is left with a distinct sense that, in the end, there is no place of respite for migrants, except a kind of spontaneous living in the moment. Through the use of cyclic and repetitive plot-structures, Vassanji suggests that the past will always impinge on the present. However, regardless of this, it remains a crucial source of meaning. At the same time that he issues a warning against the migrant's urge to cling to an image of the past, for it might just be an elaborate fantasy, Vassanji also warns against forgetting. He uses Missionary as a figure for this antinomial message at the heart of his novel: that the past can only be transcended if it is accepted. Nurdin's wife Zera, who invites Missionary to come from Tanzania, hopes that he will provide a stable, traditional counterpoint to the disorienting experiences of migration. However, Missionary confounds everyone by his ambivalent message. Against Zera's Islamic piety, he is a hybrid of the secular and the religious, the modern and the traditional. However, in an unconvincing denouement to the novel, he manages to resolve a key question that nags the migrants, namely: "When is the running, the multiple migrations, going to come to an end?" He declares Canada as the final destination for the Shamsi, a "veritable Amarapur" (198). This resolution to the novel's central problem is unconvincing because it tries to write over the fact that the immigrants continue to be haunted by racism and narrow definitions of what it means to be Canadian. At the very time that Missionary expresses this optimism about Canada, the immigrants have retreated into what Amin Malak calls a "communal cocoon," in response to the hostility that they face in their new home.[51] So unfriendly is their new abode that they can only live on its margins, a bleak vision that Chelva Kanaganayakam aptly captures when he observes that "the characters in [the novel] are all rejected by the city."[52]

Vassanji plots *No New Land* both as Nurdin's personal story of growth and as a communal *bildungsroman*. For Nurdin, one key imperative is that he attains a measure of selfhood by overcoming a narrow cultural upbringing by a tyrannical father. After the relocation to Canada, he would like to break free from the puritanical restraints of his father. In spite of his resistance to his father's legacy—through acts of watching pornography, eating pork and attempting an extra-marital affair—at the end of the novel he is inevitably pushed back to the certainties of the filial and Shamsi communal fold. His brief moments of self-exploration outside the bounds of religion and ethnicity are in the end brought to an abrupt halt by a traumatic moment: the false accusation of rape. One of the key ironies of the novel is that Nurdin only realizes a sense of stability by toning down his quest for a sense of selfhood and freedom.

By returning to the ethnic scene he had earlier vacated, Nurdin fits the profile of the prototypical Vassanji protagonist: the man who embarks on a humanist, cosmopolitan quest for an existence much more expansive than

his own narrow upbringing in traditional surroundings. By straying from rigid definitions of identity that obtain in such contexts, he hopes to join a wider community of humans, which would act as recompense for his loss. Invariably, he is rebuffed by the others he seeks to join through such a renunciation. He is thus forced back into the familiar surroundings that he had earlier abandoned. Nonetheless, this return to his group, and the belated acceptance of the demands of kinship, does not really resolve the restlessness that had earlier inspired his exilic quest in the first place. His scepticism about the demands of the group are only muted by his fear of the out-group, and his loathing of the demands of kinship therefore remains shallowly buried beneath his calm exterior.

But what then becomes of the immigrants who are torn between an elusive cosmopolitan ideal and homes to which they cannot really return? They learn to live on the margins of their host nations and on the margins of their own ethnic communities. Indeed, Vassanji's prototypical protagonists fit Julia Kristeva's description of those exiles "who waste away in an agonizing struggle between what no longer is and what will never be—the followers of neutrality, the advocates of emptiness; they are not necessarily defeatists, they often become the best of ironists."[53] Acutely conscious that they are always elsewhere, in the land of others, they know that they belong nowhere. They hover between two unattainable ideals: the host countries to which they cannot really belong, and the lost homeland to which they cannot really return because they have lost their innocence. They might try to recreate their old homes in the new land, but they soon realize, like the immigrants in *No New Land* that "their Dar, however close they tried to make it to the original, was not quite the same" (171).

# 2

# Indian Ocean Travel and Belonging in Nanji Kalidas Mehta's *Dream Half-Expressed*

Nanji Kalidas Mehta, the Gujarati plantation owner and industrialist who first sailed across the Indian Ocean to East Africa at the turn of the twentieth century, is widely known in the region for the large business firms that he founded. Such businesses include sugar plantations and processing plants at Lugazi in Uganda and Muhoroni in Kenya, sisal plantations in Tanzania, and several cotton ginneries in Uganda, all of which he set up in the first half of the century. Although Mehta died in 1969, the group of companies he founded—the Mehta Group—was, as at April 2010, valued at more than US $350 million, with 15,000 employees spread out over the group's operations in Uganda, Kenya, India, the United Kingdom (UK), the United States of America (USA) and Canada (The Mehta Group website). Of Nanji Mehta's many descendants, perhaps the most recognizable to contemporary East Africans is his sports-driver grandson, Shekhar Mehta (1945–2006), who won the Safari Rally a record five times in the late 1970s and the early 80s.

Nanji Mehta's life compels attention not only because of his central role in the establishment of agro-based industries in East Africa, but also for the way he straddled the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a time of profound political, cultural and economic change in East Africa. Although his reputation in India never came to equal that which he attained in East Africa, given that the latter had a smaller economy, he "came to rub shoulders with India's nationalist elite" and his family continues to enjoy an exceptionally privileged status in Gujarat.[1] More or less an age-mate to the first leader of independent Kenya Jomo Kenyatta (1894–1978), but a generation younger than Mahatma (Mohandas Karamchand) Gandhi (1869–1948) whom he idolized, Mehta witnessed many of the most important events that affected East Africa in his time: the building of the Kenya–Uganda Railway, the First World War, the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918, the Second World War, African nationalist activism of the 1950s and 60s, and several historical processes through which both East Africa and India were profoundly

re-shaped. His life speaks volumes of the bold experiments through which denizens of colonial societies attempted to forge new ways of being and belonging and how these came to be unmade in what was also an age of growing territorial nationalism. Mehta's travels in a quest for the thrills of adventure, prosperity, knowledge and freedom saw him travel to well over twenty countries in Europe, Africa and Asia, which is remarkable, for he did all this before the age of jet-travel.

Mehta, in his own autobiographical account, was born in Gorana village in Gujarat in 1888 to a Lohana (Gujarati Hindu) family. His paternal family's main source of income at the time was in collecting dues from the surrounding villages for the local state of Nawnagar, a role which, though with distinct economic advantages for the family, did not distinguish it much from the many other families in the village. His maternal uncle, in whose household he spent some of his formative years was also "not so well-to-do."[2] It is against this background that Mehta launched into his East African adventures, which would lead him to great wealth and influence both in India and East Africa itself.

His autobiography, *Dream Half-Expressed*, which is the main concern of this chapter, was initially published in the Gujarati language in 1961. Although he retained an inquisitive mind, as can be seen in his interest in sacred Vedic texts, new technologies for industrial production and the "national" habits of people in the many places to which he traveled, his formal education was rather limited and restricted to the vernacular. Indeed, he did not attend the school at his maternal uncle's Visavada village beyond age 12 when he decided to start assisting his father in the family business, soon after which he responded to the "call of the sea" (14). Mehta did not in fact write down the original Gujarati version of his autobiography, but dictated it to an amanuensis who is not named in the book's "Acknowledgements" page. The English translation, undertaken by S. J. Pandya and V. M. Desai at the instigation of the agricultural economist Sir Manilalbhai Nanavati, and on which this discussion is based, was published in Bombay in 1966. Unfortunately, my analysis of the autobiography is carried out without the benefit of a working knowledge of Gujarati. My argument is therefore thrice removed from Mehta's own voice: by the story as a medium with its own codes and formulas; the amanuensis who may have creatively filled in gaps in the story dictated to him by the subject; and the translators who rendered the Gujarati text into English. It is important to underscore the latter because it is risky to assume that the autobiography in question provides unproblematic access into the subject's life. Indeed, because of the constraints indicated above, I aim quite simply to read the thematic contents of the autobiography rather than to reflect on Mehta's artistry.

In his autobiography, Mehta seeks to project himself as a restless subject, infected with a sense of wanderlust and inquisitiveness that have not only made him knowledgeable, tolerant and wealthy, but also part of a much

larger world than the one he knew when he first ventured from Gujarat to East Africa in 1900. Betrothed and then married off at the early age of 12 so that he could be bound "with the fetters of social life" (*Dream*, 28), he took "an aversion to married life" and thus "naturally sought avenues of escape" (56). Indeed, so central is his professed dissatisfaction with a settled, domestic life that travel becomes a key organizing motif throughout his autobiography. To illuminate Mehta's life story and to tease out its possible relevance for understanding the many ways in which international senses of belonging were forged in the Indian Ocean World, this chapter raises four inter-related sets of questions.

First, what is the significance of an itinerant life to Mehta's autobiographical self, especially to the development of his character as he tells it? Second, as someone who confessed a strong aversion to the domestic life of a householder, what senses of home and domesticity did he cultivate? What are the realities that are masked by his rhetoric of travel, given that he kept homes, had children and retained faith in the idea of India as the national home of all Indians (especially Hindus) even as he advocated the establishment of a "world state" (96)? Third, how did he negotiate the tension between his desire—as an intercontinental trader—for a borderless world in which trade could proceed unhindered and his apparently countervailing position as a Hindu revivalist and Indian nationalist who belonged to Arya Samaj, the Hindu reform movement that was incepted in the last quarter of the nineteenth century? Indeed, how did he, as an itinerant Hindu, reconcile his need for travel and the threat of ritual pollution that cross-oceanic travel held for observant Hindus of his time? How did the breaking of caste rules in the context of cross-oceanic travel in turn influence ideas about caste distinctions in India itself? Fourth, what role did his experience in East Africa, the Indian Ocean islands and the many other parts of the world to which he traveled shape his sense of India and its possible futures?

Throughout the autobiography, Mehta seeks to present himself as "a very vigorous and restless person" (*Dream* vii), which is how members of his family describe him in the "Acknowledgements." Indeed, as the autobiography unfolds, restlessness provides the frame through which Mehta seeks to project a sense of himself to the reader. He casts himself as a daring spirit whose yearnings can only be assuaged by "adventures full of hazards in a foreign land" (29). Indeed, on his first voyage, "the vastness of the ocean and the largeness of the sky made [him] doubly enthusiastic, for to [him] they were symbols of freedom and enterprise" (35). In line with Hayden White's notion that the telling of the past involves the "poet-izing" of experience, Mehta's memoir can be read with a view to explaining how his rendition of his mercantile exploits are an attempt to turn a life/living into a story/romance.[3] Indeed, in some important sense, Mehta's life itself can be seen as an attempt to mimic the stories he had encountered in his

youth, even if his life also involved improvisation in the face of things he had never encountered before:

> When all around me felt happy and contented with the little reward which life gave them, I alone did not share their satisfaction but . . . craved to go abroad . . . My life had been like a dumb man's dream, half-expressed and half-suppressed.
>
> (*Dream*, 56)

His attempt to model his life on adventure stories he had heard and his evident desire to author an autobiography that would echo such stories draws crucial attention to the overlapping character of the two categories, life and story.

It is curious that the English translation of Mehta's autobiography has an extract from Rudyard Kipling's famous poem "If" as its epigraph:

> If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;
> If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim;
> If you can make one heap of all your winnings
> And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
> And lose, and start again at your beginnings
> And never breathe a word about your loss;
> If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
> To serve your turn long after they are gone,
> And so hold on when there is nothing in you
> Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!'
> Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
> And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!

The use of Kipling's poem is curious because Mehta himself, at least from the evidence in his autobiography, was not conversant with English literature or even literary kitsch of the kind "If" came to represent in the British Empire, given his basic vernacular education in Gujarati only. Indeed, given his limited knowledge of English, he was accompanied in his travels by a secretary who often acted as his intermediary with speakers of English and other languages.

Nonetheless, in Mehta's time, Kipling's poem, with its valorizing of the spirit of risk-taking and perseverance, had come to speak famously for a Victorian ideal of manliness, an ideal to which Mehta's publishers—Vakils, Feffer and Simons—the translators and perhaps the Mehta family may have wanted to associate with Mehta himself. However, the packaging of Mehta in the rhetoric of adventure and risk-taking ought not to be seen merely as a function of Victorian influence, as the epigraph by Kipling suggests. Rather, it should also be seen in relation to the parallel processes of incipient globalization in the Indian Ocean world into which Mehta was born. One of the

risks in reading Mehta with too keen an eye for its Victorian references would be that of overshadowing the equally interesting endogenous ideas about adventure in Gujarat, in north-western India, which had slightly different and longer antecedents in the historical world of Indian Ocean trade, travel and pilgrimage. Gujarat, in which Mehta was born, had a long tradition of trade across the Indian Ocean to the Arabian Peninsula and the East African coast. This trade was mainly carried out by Bhatia merchants, who were by the mid-nineteenth century firmly established in Zanzibar.[4] By the time Mehta was born, East Africa had long been established as part of the imaginative landscape for many in Gujarat, even those who had never traveled there. That East Africa was an important part of the imaginative landscape of Gujarat can be seen in Gunvantrai Acharya's adventure novel for children, *Dariyalal*—first published in Gujarati in 1938—which largely relied on Gujarati oral histories about the trans-oceanic trade and colonial adventure fiction.[5] The four years of basic vernacular education that Mehta received at the local school was just about enough to enable him to count money at his father's shop and to read the vernacular histories and romances alluded to above, many of which were about travel and adventure. As a 12-year-old boy, his notions of the possible were heavily influenced by such stories. For instance, when he encounters the story of a tormented young prince who leaves home "to do penance in the jungle" (*Dream*, 26), he leaves for a shrine in the surrounding hills to become an ascetic and to find adventure.

Indeed, it is such stories of adventure and trans-oceanic travel that explain Mehta's decision to leave Gujarat for the western shores of the Indian Ocean. He recalls that one of his uncles—Gokaldas— "refused to be satisfied with what he achieved in the country [India], for he heard stories of Bhatia merchants sailing in ships to establish trade—in Arabia and Africa" (*Dream*, 7). Gokaldas became the first of his near relatives to travel to East Africa, where he became a successful trader. Mehta observes that "His example served me a good incentive and filled my mind with thoughts of sea travel" (*Dream*, 8), the consequence of which is that Mehta himself becomes enchanted by the sea:

> I felt as if the sea was my old friend and sat for hours watching the blue expanse of the sea that swelled and sparkled . . . The sea had a great hold upon my imagination and I watched it with peculiar emotion that never got stale with the passing of the years . . . Young man after young man left Visavada to go abroad. And I felt miserable and lonely when I went to the seashore. The call of the sea was already inviting my imaginative self to go to the other shore.
>
> (*Dream*, 17)

Whether or not in recalling the happenings and events of his youth, the elderly Mehta imbues them with a kind of poeticism that would not have

occurred to him during his youth is a moot point. What is clear is that by the time his formal education comes to an end, he is well-equipped to cause mischief at home, which is exactly what he does. His sense of mischief is seen in his admiration of the Mahers (or Mers), a community in Saurashtra with a reputation for their martial traditions and who were generally regarded as outlaws in his time. Even in the 1950s, when he was in his sixties, Mehta continued his juvenile fascination with the Mahers, whom he used as strongmen to break a communist-led strike at his Maharana Textile Mills—thus sowing the seeds of the culture of political violence that persists in Gujarat into the first decade of the twenty-first century, largely at the instigation of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).[6] What is perhaps most striking about Mehta's fusion of longstanding Indian narratives of adventure and more recent colonial stories of exploration and manliness is the insight it provides into how capitalism was indigenized, and western technology domesticated, in the cultural imagination of leaders of Indian capitalism like Mehta himself. By summoning the authority of Vedic texts in justification of modern trans-oceanic trade, Mehta and his ilk would not only assure themselves that they remained good Hindus—in spite of their crossing of the *Kala Pani*, by dint of which they ought to have lost their ritual purity—but also manage to recruit Hindu "tradition" for "modernity". Indeed, it is this tension between heritage and novelty that lies at the heart of contemporary right-wing Hindu politics in India, as is captured in a T-shirt logo made in India: "From Om to Atom!" The logo, which can be read in rather ambivalent ways, both mocks BJP's obsession with a "Hindu" atomic bomb, a dream the party realized in 1998, and draws attention to the kind of split consciousness that makes it possible to celebrate ancient traditions of worship (as embodied in the chant "Om") while also effectively partaking in a modern technology with non-Hindu antecedents that may, following BJP logic, be decried as un-Hindu. It is a similar feeling of internal displacement that Mehta has to contend with in his autobiography.

To quell his dream for adventure, and in keeping with cultural practices of the time, Mehta is at the young age of 13 married off to a 12-year-old girl whose name he does not bother to state when he first mentions her in the text. Indeed, throughout the autobiography, he makes only the most cursory references to her. Made to marry her against his wishes, he consoles himself thus:

> Right or wrong, I had certain ideas about those great men who succeeded late in life. Discouraged by their married life, they many times left their hearths and homes and turned out to be great adventurers . . . Perhaps they transferred their loyalty to a higher cause, and used up their pent-up energies in other fruitful fields which they liked more. A soft man wedded to the life of a householder cannot sail the high seas, scale

> the tallest mountains and take up hazards that draw the attention of the world.
>
> (*Dream*, 29)

In 1900 when Mehta was only 13 and just a short time after his marriage, his elder brother, who was at that point a trader in Madagascar, sent him an invitation to go and serve him as a cook and shop assistant. Young Mehta crosses the Indian Ocean for the first time in a dhow, without his young bride, sailing from Bombay to Mombasa and then onward to Majunga in Madagascar. Although steamships were already plying the route, he and his party did not manage to find one in Bombay, hence the decision to make the crossing in a dhow, a large wooden sea-going sailboat held together by coconut twine, which offered greater flexibility than vessels held together by metallic nails, which tended to be weakened by the corrosive sea water.[7] Mehta's story of his first crossing is crucial because, apart from this and his first trip back to India, he does not mention using a dhow ever again in the autobiography. His life story therefore stands at an important historical cusp: those crucial years in which European technology relegated endogenous technologies to a lesser role in the making of the Indian Ocean World, which now melded into larger global networks made possible by European colonial empires.

On the journey from Zanzibar to Majunga, the dhow in which Mehta was traveling was hit by a violent storm and drifted at sea for several weeks; indeed, it took the crew and passengers forty-six days to get to the island of Mayotte (in the Comoros archipelago) twice the time it took the dhow on the Bombay–Mombasa leg, which is considerably longer. In his autobiography, Mehta squeezes meaning out of this episode, taking pains to show how it shaped his personality, especially as one of the pioneers of capitalism in East Africa. The storm and the dhow become for Mehta a metaphor for life itself: "life was not a bed of roses and no lotus-eaters would survive when dangers arose, or death stared them in the face. 'To live dangerously' should be the motto of our youths and no pampering will carry them anywhere, since life demands courage and resourcefulness in moments of crisis" (*Dream*, 44). This idea of the ocean as a builder of character and a laboratory for the creation of a new kind of Indian is pursued in greater depth later in the chapter. What the chapter would like to address at this point is how Mehta reconciled his professed disdain for domestic life with the fact that he was, whether he liked it or not, a married man with a home, a wife and children, whom he hoped would carry on his legacy.

Although Mehta insistently cultivates in the autobiography the image of a man who consciously freed himself from the limitations of being a live-in husband, his wife did indeed join him in Uganda just before World War I broke out in Europe. Up until this point in the autobiography, Mehta has only mentioned his wife twice, on the second occasion saying simply that

she was one of the many people he found in Gorana upon returning from his first stint in East Africa. He says it in a rather matter-of-fact tone: "My wife too was present" (*Dream*, 102). When she comes to join him at Kamuli, Uganda, he describes her arrival and subsequent stay with him thus:

> I called my family to live with me. With the coming of my wife our meals were properly looked after; our worries for looking after the well-being of our families thousands of miles away from Africa ceased and all of us breathed a sigh of relief as we were free from domestic worries. That made me more interested in my work and I devoted myself wholeheartedly to my increasing business . . . I do not remember to have spent a whole year with the members of my family during those hectic days.
>
> (*Dream*, 113)

When Mehta's first wife and his two cousins die in the post-War influenza epidemic of 1918, he considers returning to India permanently, but soon gives up this plan. However, when he returns to India for a brief visit, he discovers that he has been betrothed to a 16-year old girl (about half his age) without his knowledge, the match being made by a lawyer relative. Again, this becomes the cause of a withering broadside on domestic life: "Domestic life spelt bondage for me, for my greatest joy was in business . . . The news of my betrothal upset me a little, but after fifteen days of restless musings I had to yield to the pressure of my dear old father and other relatives of the family" (*Dream*, 142–143). Yet, in spite of these strong statements of indifference to family life, his later years are marked by a strong quest for respectability that frequently entails the attempt to leave a legacy, not only for his children but also for India itself. It is no wonder then, that like many patriarchs, a Last Supper-type group photograph of himself—now an elderly 73-year old patriarch—and several members of his family is included in the autobiography (opp. page 318). The picture—which for East African readers in particular may be recognizably similar to Jomo Kenyatta's memorable last group photograph taken with members of his family the day before his death—features the elderly patriarch sitting in the front row with an infant, presumably one of his grandchildren, on his lap. Seated next to the patriarch on the front row are his female relatives: his wife, daughter and daughters-in-law. His sons and grandsons stand in the back row.

Read against this clear attempt to convey the image of a respectable family man, Mehta's earlier claims of impatience with domestic life are shown to be at best contradictory. Indeed, the gap between Mehta's self-fashioning through narrative as a permanent sojourner and the sense of homely comfort in the photograph draws significant attention to a core problem in masculinities predicated on adventure and travel. Male traders like Mehta may have come to believe in a myth of adventure while the reality was that

they were still dependent on the domestic labor of women for their own reproduction, a fact that the photograph in question brings into sharp focus.

However, Mehta was not, given his subscription to many of the "progressive" political ideas circulating in his time, a thoroughgoing male chauvinist, as the above might suggest. For instance, one of his most memorable contributions to Porbandar, the city in which he lived later in life, was the famous girls' school he built there: the Arya Kanya Gurukul. However, even the very act of women's empowerment that was built into the school project was shot through with many contradictions. On the one level, the school sought to provide education to girls who would previously have been denied opportunities for formal education on the basis of their gender. On another level, even this goal of the Kanya Gurukul in retrospect seems rather conventional. Mehta's vision for the school as a modern and progressive home for "cultural synthesis" is undermined by nationalist ideas about the role of women that are striking in their conservatism. He outlines his hopes for the school and girls' education in the following manner: "I am sure, so long as women stick to our mode of life and preserve our culture, a thousand winds of change shall not affect the accumulated *samskaras* of Indian nation and a happy synthesis of the East and the West will enliven our homes and enrich our society through these sweeter, softer, yet brave ambassadors of our culture." Indeed, he sees it as "the duty of Aryan women to preserve, defend and contribute to their rich culture" (*Dream*, 208). While as a man Mehta puts great emphasis on his travels, thus suggesting that he is a "progressive agent of national modernity . . . embodying nationalism's progressive, or revolutionary principle of discontinuity," his vision for the Kanya Gurukul effectively puts women in the position of "the atavistic and authentic body of national tradition . . . embodying nationalism's conservative principle of continuity."[8] In regard to the ethos of the Gurukul, Savita Nair has observed that it is "reminiscent of early social reform movements of late-nineteenth century India that correlated the position of women with Indian civilization and societal value, but had little to do with the actual upliftment or experience of women themselves."[9] The contradictions alluded to above arise out of Mehta's experimentation with a large set of eclectic ideas, which he assimilated without much thought for their logical and political coherence—a consequence, perhaps, of his improvisational approach to the problems with which he had to grapple. Nonetheless, it is through such eclectic sets of ideas that so many societies were built in the wake of colonial change, especially in the global South. The tensions that arise in such contexts of apparently unmanageable change and the creative human responses to them can be seen, equally, in Mehta's attempt to reconcile the contradiction between his desire as a major intercontinental trader for a border-free world in which trade could proceed unhindered and his position as a Hindu revivalist and Indian nationalist.

One of the contradictions faced by Hindu traders in their quest for commerce in the Indian Ocean world was the sea itself, the crossing of which

came to represent the threat of impurity and the loss of caste. This fear is well captured in the notion of the *Kala Pani*, the fearsome black waters that made Hindu travelers outsiders in their own communities. The *Kala Pani* theme has been famously elaborated in V. S. Naipaul's writings on the Indian diaspora in the West Indies and also found resonance in recent studies of the Indian diaspora in African countries.[10] The fear of contamination as posited in the idea of the *Kala Pani* was compounded by storms and pirates, all of which made crossing the ocean in dhows a treacherous affair. In his autobiography, Mehta writes about the ways in which travelers tried to manage the threat of ritual pollution in the crowded dhows that often transported people from different communities and caste groups. For Hindus, the maintenance of a place in the caste-structure while on transit came then to depend on who cooked one's food and who one ate together with. This was initially an important issue for Mehta, who came from a strict Vaishnava background, even though at the time of dictating his autobiography he came to dismiss such practices as outdated:

> Each one of the community groups cooked its own food and dined separately for social injunction forbade one group to dine with the members of another group. Today I see that there is hardly any justification for holding to those lifeless traditions or pseudo-religious superstitions. Men should treat their fellowmen as equals and develop a tolerant outlook towards other people and their customs. Only good food hygienically prepared and decently served is the prime necessity of modern times.
>
> (*Dream*, 34)

Strictly speaking, Mehta as a member of the Kshatriya ought not to have been bothered by the *Kala Pani* rule, which applied specifically to Brahmans. However, in his time, increasing "Sanskritization and Brahman emulation might have ensconced ideas about pollution from overseas travel even among those groups that specialized in it . . . The latter seems plausible since the Mehtas were not Brahmans, but certainly they were high caste Gujaratis who emulated Brahmanical rituals and practices."[11] The core problem from the vantage point of the Brahmanic tradition was that travel made one an ex-centric, a threat to the very borders of the community. This was even more so for those who traveled to Africa, which seemed to be at the very limits of the known and the possible. This rather exotic image developed in India in spite of the fact that knowledge about Africa was already implicit in the Hindu pantheon, for instance the stories about Vaishnava saints that Mehta encounters as a young boy, which contain references to a "negro-saint" (*Dream*, 24). The latter might be a reference to Bava Gor, a fifteenth century Sufi of African origin and to whom members of the African diaspora of India—the Sidis—continue to offer songs of devotion several centuries later.[12] Although Mehta's reference to the "negro saint" is only cursory, it

points to a long history of African contact with India, which is denied in the understanding of Africa as the very limits of the known and a potential source of pollution. So deep is the fear of ritual pollution that when Mehta returns to India for the first time from Africa, he has "to go for purificatory rites to Nasik [to dip into the sacred river Gudavari], for all those who crossed the high seas and went to foreign lands were required to cleanse themselves and expiate their pollution according to custom" (*Dream*, 107–108). Nonetheless, even traveling within India itself posed significant threats of ritual pollution, as is the case when Mehta travels to the largely Tamil-speaking city of Madras, where Hindi was not well-known. Due to the language barrier and the misunderstandings that inevitably arise in such encounters Mehta, a fastidious vegetarian, is served a fish dish by "a tall, fat, dark-complexioned cook" (*Dream*, 106), which results in a physical fight between the two. In the passage in which Mehta narrates the Madras encounter, he remains largely oblivious of his own color and caste prejudices of the kind he castigates elsewhere in the autobiography. The violent encounter with the Tamil man becomes for Mehta a good reason for the development of "one *lingua franca* in which people can communicate with each other in all parts of the country" (*Dream*, 107).

In what would seem like a rationalization for his ritual transgressions, Mehta frequently falls back to his background as a member of the warrior caste, the Kshatriya. This is his way of claiming that travel and adventure is expected of him and that by traveling he is merely acting out his duties and destiny as a Hindu "warrior who was habituated to dangerous situations" (*Dream*, 150). Indeed, he seeks to lend legitimacy to his cross-oceanic travel by citing the precedent of the "devout pilgrims and *sadhus* who moved from place to place and echoed the age-old urge to wander incessantly in search of enlightenment" (*Dream*, 57). His conversations with the holy men soon make him envious of their freedom. However, in contrast to the holy men whose traveling has little economic motive, he uses their precedence to justify his business ambitions: "why should a young man sit idle at home and rest satisfied with what he had, when life was ready to offer so much, both materially and spiritually? There could be no end to enterprise and adventure and all talk of 'peace' and 'contentment' was nothing but empty talk" (*Dream*, 57). I find these rationalizations of travel and modern change in Mehta interesting for they draw attention to the ways in which novel developments in the subject's life ultimately find justification in an ostensible Hindu past. What, if anything, does any of this tell us about the role of the notion of "cultural synthesis," to which Mehta subscribed, in providing legitimacy to economic, political and cultural change in his time? In his political stances, his funding of charities for the restoration of Vedic culture, his openness to new ideas, especially modern industrial technologies, Mehta in some sense represents the Janus-face of Indian nationalism, which largely fits novelist M. G. Vassanji's characterization of India as a place of

such "eclectic figures who have knowledge but are not always consistent." Vassanji says of such figures that:

> They are partly Westernized and partly steeped in Eastern mysticism . . . [a] kind of mixture [that] is very Indian . . . you have all these contradictory things going on. I am sure there are lots of people there who can quote Marx or Hegel and then believe in something very traditional, probably astrology, and that, I think, is very Indian.[13]

Vassanji's assumption that openness to newness and a simultaneous yearning for the past is characteristically Indian is perhaps limited if we consider that most nineteenth and twentieth century nationalisms could be said to be constituted in more or less the same way—harking back to the past while seeking to reform and modernize. This dual quality is seen in Mehta who, even as he played a crucial role in the processes through which the interior of East Africa was made subject to colonial modernity, pined for a lost past in which "greed and stinginess was unknown [and no one] would . . . dare be a miser" (*Dream*, 12). The richer he became, the more he bemoaned "modern materialism" (58) that had created a world so "full of artificiality [that] one seldom comes across true love, devotion, heroism or sincerity of heart" (316).

Mehta attempted to resolve the seeming conflict between his faith and the reality of change and cultural contact in the Indian Ocean world in two crucial ways. First, by what strikes me as an exaggerated anxiety about cleanliness in Hindu shrines in the Indian sub-continent, which he visited obsessively once he had become wealthy. As an elderly baron, his thinking came to be dominated by a yearning for Hindu revival, in the face of what he perceived as competition from other faiths: "The places are, of course, very important and sacred but would they not be much more so if they were a bit cleaner, a little more beautiful and still better administered? The holy places of the Jains, the Buddhists, the Parsees and the Christians look more inviting and cleaner" (*Dream*, 296). Second, he invoked notions of cultural synthesis and embraced projects of religious reform as a way of tempering the experience of displacement and change. Religious reform and revival was meant to forge greater knowledge of old sacred texts while also modernizing the Hinduism in line with prevailing ideas about equality and freedom. This simultaneous commitment to reform and cultural conservation was in keeping with Mehta's role as an active member of the Arya Samaj movement in East Africa. Founded in 1875 by Dayananda Saraswati, the movement tried "to appeal to western-educated Hindus by advocating the reform of Indian culture and its synthesis with western education," the assumption being that "to assimilate their education successfully, the new Indian elite had to accept, at least in some fashion, the European world view."[14] The ideas promulgated by the Arya Samajists, alongside those propounded by

the Brahmo Samaj movement and the Theosophical Society, were later to provide a grammar for Hindu nationalism, at the core of which was what Christopher Jaffrelot has called "strategic syncretism."[15] I consider Mehta's embrace of the creed of cultural synthesis in the paragraphs that follow.

Mehta's biography provides useful insights into how the experiences of Indian migrants and travelers may have shaped their senses of India and its possible futures. In the passages that follow, the chapter examines the senses of belonging that Mehta came to cultivate as a consequence of his itinerant life and what insights this might yield for our understanding of the effects of migration on senses of Indian citizenship. What senses of cultural belonging did he develop in the context of his life in a series of unfamiliar locations? What kinds of communities did travel make possible and what lessons could such new communities hold for India itself? In other words, what did a life outside India mean for the emergent notions of Indian nationhood? In thinking about the meanings of citizenship and belonging, I focus more on their social rather than legal senses, a distinction that William Shack has tried to establish in his discussion of the difference between *societas* and *civitas*, with the former referring to the informal codes through which communities determine who belongs and the latter referring to the domain of the modern state with its legal codes for conferring citizen rights.[16]

Mehta was an avid traveler by any measure. It is remarkable that in an age before transcontinental jet travel, he traveled to over 25 countries in Africa, Asia and Europe. The list includes India itself—which he criss-crossed in his numerous visits to Hindu shrines—Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika, Zanzibar, Madagascar, Mozambique, the Comoros, South Africa, Ethiopia, Egypt, Ceylon, Malaya, Singapore, China, Japan, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Britain, Italy, Germany Czechoslovakia, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, France, Mauritius and others. His travels inspired in him an increasing attachment to a creed of ecumenical openness to new ways of looking at the world, beyond those to which he had become accustomed in his earlier days. It is no wonder then that he came to advocate the principle of "cultural synthesis" in the autobiography. "Cultural synthesis" was a fairly widespread concept in the twentieth century, especially in countries such as Turkey, where it was first promoted by Ottoman thinkers,[17] South Asia, where it played a key role both in the political ideology of secularism and in movements of religious reform such as Arya Samaj and Ismailism, and in newly independent African countries in which it was commonly advanced by writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Taban lo Liyong.[18] In the African case in particular, nationalist intellectuals saw the idea of "cultural synthesis" as an effective way of establishing continuities with the past in the face of modern change while not entirely missing out on the putative benefits of colonial modernization.

The clamor for cultural synthesis can be read as an attempt, although an anxious one, to provide grounding for nationalism in the face of vast

changes that undermined claims to national cultures. Although there was a lingering sense, among those who held to the creed of cultural synthesis, that it was not possible to speak of unsullied national and ethnic cultures, the claim to synthesis was an attempt to wrest modern change for nationalist projects. This kind of ambivalent affirmation of national belonging is aptly captured in the song "Meera Joota Hai Japani," composed by Shankar Jaikishan and first sung by Mukesh Chand Mathur in Raj Kapoor's famous film *Shree 420* (1955):

*Mera joota hai* Japani
Ye *patloon hai* inglistani
*Sar* pe *lal* topi roosi
Par *bhi dil hai hindustani*
My shoes are Japanese
And the trousers are English
The cap on my head is Russian
But my heart is Hindustani

(Indian)

Similarly, Mehta's family would ascribe to him an ambivalent affiliation, describing him in the foreword to the autobiography as "a lover of Indian culture but . . . spiritually attached to the bountiful and fertile soil of Uganda" (*Dream* ix). However, for Mehta, the possibility of any mutual cultural exchange with East Africa was foreclosed by what he saw as a yawning civilizational gap between Africans and Indians. He describes Uganda as "the land of bounty and eternal fertility, where I was free to do whatever I liked and launch any new enterprise that would appeal to my restless and stubborn self" (71). However, this identification with the "soil" of East Africa bypasses any identification with the people living there, who he regards as foils for India in a hierarchy of civilizations:

> . . . they led their innocent lives, made themselves one with nature and frequented the surrounding forests for game. The traditional innocence and child-like naivete of the first children of mother earth shone on their face . . . They seemed not to care for the morrow and their life flowed straight and natural like a simple stream, full and unsullied, without the challenge of modern artificial civilization.
>
> (*Dream*, 89–90)

So insistent is this kind of racial Othering of African society and geography in the autobiography that Mehta states, in rather a matter-of-fact way that "So powerful is the poison of snakes in Africa that their poisonous breath or hissing is sufficient to kill a man" (132), which is reminiscent of the one-horned rhinoceros that haunts the wilds of East Africa in Gunvantrai Acharya's *Dariyalal*.

Having made very few references in his autobiography to the many Africans he no doubt met in the interior of East Africa in his commercial endeavors, Mehta reserves his reflections on cultural exchange and synthesis for the East African coast and the Indian Ocean islands. Unlike the journeys in the African interior, those with fellow South Asians across the ocean and experiences of contact on the coasts and islands represent for him something that is both familiar—due to a long tradition of cultural exchange with the Middle East and South Asia—and also something refreshingly new. The human communities formed on the dhows, the coasts and the islands were for Mehta a compelling experiment on what India itself could eventually become. For instance, shared adversity in dhows during the crossing of the sea come to stand for an Indian sense of nationhood that is yet to be realized, but that might be realized through caste reform:

> When a ship sinks or a house catches fire or flood devastates a village, all distinctions of caste and creed crash before the unexpected calamities and the milk of human kindness flows from the hearts of those whom power, pelf and position have divided only a few minutes before . . . I have come to realize that there is no distinction between man and man and no one should be considered low because of birth or position.
>
> (*Dream*, 47)

When the dhow he is sailing in from Zanzibar to Majunga in Madagascar gets caught up in a storm and accidentally lands on the shores of Mayotte (in the Comoros Archipelago), the assistance the passengers and crew receive from local people convinces Mehta that "The heart of man was full of love for his fellowmen. A natural bond of affection would grow if power-mad politicians and money-making merchants did not spoil and vitiate the love of men" (48). Shared adversity in the context of the storm thus leads to greater inter-communal cohesion and the dhow becomes for Mehta a sign for a desired community in India itself. In Mauritius, in which the plantation system had fostered an ecumenical spirit, Mehta is struck by what he considers Hindu–Muslim unity: "they stayed like brothers and mixed with one another in a dignified and brotherly way that befitted their great culture and common national heritage" (*Dream*, 176). In consequence, he yearns for similar "places in India where both communities could sit and eat together and unite to fight a common disease by worshipping a local deity" (177). It is no wonder, then, that the variant of Indian nationalism propounded by Mehta's associate, Mahatma Gandhi—who made the case for the ending of untouchability, expanding women's rights and fostering communal amity in India—was in a significant way born in diaspora, in the networks of trade, labor and religion in the Indian Ocean World. If, as Isabel Hofmeyr has remarked, the history of the Indian diaspora "has until recently been a story of one-way movement" that examines the movement

of Indians to other parts of the world, an approach which ignores "questions of what such migration means for India or what the intellectual formations in the diaspora mean for developments back home," Mehta's autobiography provides a useful resource for thinking about the impact of the diaspora on India.[19]

Although a life of constant travel and the veneration of the Indian past by the Arya Samaj—an invocation of a Hindu "Golden Age" as remarked upon by Zavos[20]—may explain Mehta's marked nostalgia, such nostalgia did not necessarily draw him into a rejection of new ideas. Indeed, openness to the new remained a central creed for Mehta as members of his family note in the "Foreword" where they write of "[his] eagerness to learn from the lives and attitudes of others [which] reveal[s] a catholic outlook which is a recurring note of his assimilative personality" (*Dream* xi). In spite of the unfair competition he experienced from European firms in the Ugandan cotton trade and the prejudices to which he was subjected as an Indian, he maintained a sense of openness to ideas and technologies from Europe, which is at odds with Gandhi's rejection of "modern" technology: "Although India has enough to present to Europe, it would be more profitable for us to learn as much as possible from them and add to India's knowledge and experience" (*Dream*, 184). He expresses a similar sense of openness to Japan and thinks highly of the Japanese model of modernization: "Japan was the first to accept western science and industrial culture without losing its national identity" (*Dream*, 229), a sentiment that is still echoed by contemporary Pan-African nationalists like Oyekan Owomoyela.[21] However, Mehta is careful to add that "If India has much to learn from Europe, it has to beware of its limitations also" (*Dream*, 189).

Given his experiences as a traveler and a trader dependent on open borders, Mehta came to express his skepticism about a "narrow nationalism or sheer anti-colonialism" in favor of "a new humanistic culture" realizable through the setting up of what he calls a "World state" (*Dream*, 96), a skeptical position that was taken in India in varying ways by Jawaharlal Nehru and Rabindranath Tagore, and in East Africa by the Kenyan-Goan lawyer John Maximian Nazareth.[22] Even as he attended the meetings of the Indian National Congress and sought audience with Gandhi, Mehta's sense of the world as a trader lured him to something more than India itself, even as he acted to revivify Hinduism as a member of the Arya Samaj. In Mehta, we therefore have an intriguing example of the kind of cultural contradiction produced in the context of Indian Ocean travel and twentieth century nationalism, in this case a Hindu revivalist who also yearns for citizenship of the world: a global state.

As *Dream Half-Expressed* records, public projects and monuments that Mehta funded with the proceeds of his businesses are scattered all over India and East Africa. These evidences of his munificence embody Mehta's contradictions and indeed the Janus-face of nationalism in the global South,

of which he presents a compelling example. At Mahatma Gandhi's birthplace in Porbandar, the capital city of Gujarat and only a short distance from Mehta's own birthplace, he built a memorial for Gandhi known as Mahatma Gandhi Kirti Mandir as a sign of his own devotion to India and as a showcase of Indian architecture. If Gandhi has come to represent in the global popular imagination a tradition of anti-modernism, Mehta's building of The Nehru Planetarium in Porbandar stands as a testimony to Nehru's modernist inclinations, which Mehta admired as an industrialist. The Arya Kanya Gurukul, the school for girls that Mehta set up, and was run by his daughter Santokben, "as a home of cultural synthesis . . . a new experiment in women's education" (*Dream*, 204–205) attests to Mehta's nostalgic preoccupation with "Aryan culture" as well as a reformist desire for women's emancipation in line with the teachings of the Arya Samaj movement. Interestingly, the school was not attended by Indian girls alone but also by a small number of black East African girls, as can be seen in a picture of the school band that is included in the book. This raises questions about how black African girls could preserve Aryan culture in line with the school's mission. Was this simply an exercise in cultural assimilation or is it better seen as an attempt to forge cross-cultural understanding? Whatever the answer to these questions may be, what is clear is that Mehta's projects of Hindu revival were shot through with paradoxes that arose from his restless experimentation.

In East Africa, in addition to building the Kampala Town Hall, a recreational park, a library and what was to become a famous nursery school in Mombasa, Mehta provided funds for the building of the Ugandan National Theatre in Kampala, in service to an emergent national culture in Uganda. Perhaps the most important of his East African public projects was the Royal Technical College, Nairobi, which later became the University of Nairobi. Mehta headed the Mahatma Gandhi memorial Committee, formed in 1949 shortly after Gandhi's assassination and made up mostly of East African Indian businessmen, which raised money for the building of the college. The college itself was meant to be a showpiece and "a foundation . . . for inter-racial co-operation and scholarship" to which "all were invited to study . . . irrespective of caste, community or colour" (*Dream*, 260).

Although the long history of East Africa's interaction with India was given serious scholarly attention in the 1960s and 70s, during much of the following two decades, little emerged that extended such earlier studies. As such, Mehta's story as one of the key figures that straddled the history of modern India and East Africa has remained under-examined. What is certainly clear from recent scholarship on the Indian Ocean World is that scholarly knowledge of both East Africa and India is impoverished by approaches that do not take seriously processes of exchange across national and continental borders.[23] In a famous passage in Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, the character Whiskey Sisodia stutters that "the trouble with the Engenglish is that their hiss hiss history happened overseas, so they do do don't know

what it means."[24] Could it also be said of Indians that they do not fully understand their history because a substantial aspect of it happened in Africa, just as East Africans may not fully understand their past because some of it happened in India, or worse, sank to the bottom of the Indian Ocean?

It is interesting that the street on which Mehta built his textile factory, the Maharana Mills in Porbandar, came to be called Uganda Road. In important ways, Uganda forms part of the history and imaginative landscape of Gujarat and vice versa. This notwithstanding the fact that Mehta's legacy in Uganda remains at best controversial, as can be seen in the description in Okot p'Bitek's *Lak Tar* (*White Teeth* in its English translation) of labor conditions in Uganda's sugar plantations and in the riots that followed the government's granting of Mabira forest to the Mehta Group in 2007 so that the latter could expand its sugarcane plantation. It is abundantly clear that—in spite of his long residence in East Africa and his toying with ideas of cultural synthesis—India, Gujarat and Hinduism remained Mehta's primary loci of identification. Africa as Nair has observed was for him, and several of his contemporaries, "an invisible palate on which Indians and Europeans painted the scene."[25] Nonetheless, his long African residence invites questions about the submerged stories of Indian–African interaction in history. What could a historian of Uganda learn from the archives of Gujarat? What could a critic of Gujarati writing glean from a study of Ugandan literature? A whole lot of interesting possibilities would be opened by studies that attempt to look beyond national borders and to reach beyond the conventional borders of the mind that continue to limit the ways scholars in the humanities conduct their work. Indeed, in Mehta's autobiography, such borders take a special significance for their power to deny shared histories. As he says at the end of the autobiography, "Though I have often traveled to Africa and contributed humbly to its development, the irony of fate is that I have not earned any citizenship rights there, for I could never stay for a continuous period of five years in Africa as demanded by law" (*Dream*, 317). Readers of the autobiography are likely to take his professed humility with a pinch of salt, but on the problem of borders, he does make a compelling point that is critical for those working on the histories of India and Africa.

# 3
# Gastropolitics and Diasporic Self-Writing

What people eat or drink provides in East African Asian literature what may be called, following Arjun Appadurai, "a peculiarly powerful semiotic device."[1] Not only do food and drink evoke in members of immigrant Asian communities a sense of their past in the wake of multiple migrations into, within and out of East Africa, they are also a powerful index of a sense of security and belonging, or the feeling of being cast adrift in strange new worlds. On the one hand, what the immigrant characters in the literature eat or drink may indicate their resistance to the dominant systems that try to assimilate them, while on the other hand it may act as a sign of their capitulation to undesired cultural influences. Some of the most caustic of the insults in the literature are those that refer to the gastronomic habits of individuals, religious groups and even racial ones. Food in this literature marks the borders between communities and for that very reason also acts as one of the most important ways of building bridges between hitherto hostile groups: to adapt to the culinary practices of others and to accept their food becomes a profound gesture of recognition. For the migrant Indian communities in the literature, to cook food that is conventionally labeled "Indian" may be a way of assertively occupying spaces to which they have migrated, just as it may be frowned upon by others as a sign of cultural isolationism. So large does food loom in Indian East African writing that, at certain moments, it approaches the status of a substitute for writing itself: to remember a recipe and to produce in one's kitchen the dish to which it refers—indeed to recall in a new time or place a taste one once savored in another time and place—is to demonstrate cultural memory and to "write" oneself into history. Following this logic, those who are unable to tell their pasts through oral storytelling or writing might as well animate such pasts in the present through the material agency of food and the acts that go into its preparation and enjoyment. The latter is especially true of women who, traditionally discouraged from public eloquence, find a grammar for public discourse in food preparation or the remembering of recipes passed down by those gone before. In short, food in Indian East African writing "encode[s] a

complex set of social and moral propositions" that merit more than casual scrutiny.[2]

Before getting into an examination of the semiotic role of food and drink in Indian East African writing, a brief discussion of uses of the gastronomical and the culinary in the wider field of African writing is necessary. Food and eating have most memorably appeared in African literature and popular culture as metaphors for political corruption, the greedy acquisition of material goods and the social inequality engendered by greed in both the colonial and post-independence eras. References to the gastronomical and the culinary are numerous in African writing, yet these have largely served as adjuncts to privileged themes such as post-independence cultures of corruption and urban poverty.[3] Some of the most memorable of such references are those about fat-bellied and flatulent men, politically well-connected figures who have used their influence to "eat well" at the expense of the suffering masses of the people as in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born* (1968), Ngugi wa Thiongo's *Devil on the Cross* (1982) and Francis Imbuga's play *Betrayal in the City* (1976).[4] In other notable instances, food is used as an index of gender power, as in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) where Okonkwo's masculine prowess is linked to his success in the farming of yams, a manly crop in the pre-colonial world of the Igbo. In Ferdinand Oyono's *The Old Man and the Medal* (1956) the scene of failed commensality at the colonial prize-giving ceremony is used to make commentary on the futility of the French policy of assimilation in Cameroon, a policy into which old man Meka has bought naively. Indeed, much of post-colonial African writing, focused as it has been on the urgent problems of decolonization, nation-formation and post-independence political repression, has rarely focused on food in its ordinariness, in the labor that goes into the production of its ingredients, the ways and means through which it is prepared, the way it mediates social relationships or even quite simply the pleasures that it gives. The literature of African decolonization has, with few exceptions, relegated food to the status of local color, material culture props that serve mostly to make narratives believable, or simply as a metaphor for the high politics of the state.

However, in the literature by a recent group of African writers, into which the authors examined in this chapter fall, mundane facts of daily life have come to occupy a place greater than that accorded to them in the largely ascetic and singularly serious-minded writing of decolonization. Saying this is not to suggest a categorical break between supposed generations of African writers, but merely to signal to the way in which contemporary African writing has extended upon the concerns elaborated in the earlier literature of decolonization, filling many of its gaps and generally lending to images of lived African experience a quality much more textured and varied than the monotones presented in the older, classical texts of decolonization.[5] This focus on the ordinary can be seen especially in the work of African writers

in the diaspora, for whom ordinary objects of material culture such as food evoke powerful links with places left behind and for whom cuisines provide the grammar for rendering the experience of loss and longing.[6] Such is the case with the Nigerian novelist Chris Abani, whose story of a displaced boy in the slum-yards of Lagos in *Graceland* (2004) is interspersed with recipes passed to him by a mother now dead. Cast adrift in the harsh conditions of a Lagos slum-life, he finds comfort through remembering a dead mother whose recipes call to his mind the certainties of a domestic life for which he yearns. In this chapter, attention is directed not to representations of food in African literature as such, but more specifically to the place of food in the literature by Indian East African writers.

The present chapter seeks to account for the centrality of food as material reality and symbol in this body of writing, showing how and why it is particularly salient in the writers' imagination of the Indian presence in East Africa. It aims to show why and how food mediates the experience of displacement in the literature, in the process probing into the political character of food, what Appadurai calls "gastro-politics."[7] What does the symbolism of food tell us about conflicts between Africans and Indians, and in what way does food enable the writers to imagine a world beyond such conflicts? How, for instance, does food act as a marker of the changing social status of Indian East Africans in the immigrant journeys that take them through colonial and post-colonial East Africa, and their eventual second migrations to Europe and North America? How does food, in literary senses, encode histories of resistance, accommodation and also cultural exchange in contexts marked variously by racialism, violence, communal expulsions and inequality? Why do the writers find in food a useful tool for mediating personal and communal stories, making it in the process an important focus of feelings of nostalgia, loss and longing? How do food and drink inscribe communal boundaries or act as indices of social status, personal character or even gendered power? The chapter explores the concerns above by examining the writings of three key figures in Indian East African writing: Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, Jameela Siddiqi and M. G. Vassanji.

Born in Kampala in 1949, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown left Uganda in 1972 to join her fiancé in Britain. Her family which, like many Indian East Africans of the time held British citizenship, had earlier been forced to leave Uganda to a Britain that was also unwilling to accept them. Alibhai-Brown, who was at the time reading for her undergraduate degree at Makerere University, was not expelled together with her family but was left behind in a country characterized by growing anti-Indian hostility from General Idi Amin's military government. A few weeks after her marriage in Britain later in 1972, an expulsion order was issued by Amin that forced the remaining Indians to leave Uganda. Alibhai-Brown, who has since risen to become a journalist, public commentator of note, a key figure in British anti-racist activism and scholarship and a recipient of a knighthood from the queen of England

(which she later spurned) only returned to Uganda for a brief working visit in 1994, to a country much different from the one she had known. She is the author of, among others, two autobiographies that are the subject of this analysis. The first is *No Place Like Home* (1995), a straightforward piece in which she tries to come to terms with and to verbalize the intense feelings engendered by her long and enforced exile from the country of her birth. At the end of the book, she states her wish for an eventual return to Uganda. In *The Settler's Cookbook: A Memoir of Love, Migration and Food* (2008) Alibhai-Brown is more skeptical about the possibility of recovering the home that she has lost. Here, she dismisses the possibility of return to Uganda, having come to terms with the fact of her unsettled life in Britain, in a post-911 context marked by growing anti-Asian and anti-Muslim sentiment. This second memoir is much more experimental than the first, for it doubles as a cookbook. Alibhai-Brown associates important moments in her life story with particular foods that act as a reminder of the moments thus recalled. In many ways, this magnifies and adds to the more cursory references to food in *No Place Like Home*, giving them a degree of visibility that they do not have in the first autobiography. Food, in this sense, cannot be seen as a mere add-on to Alibhai-Brown's telling of displacement and nostalgia, but as the very focus and subject of nostalgia, given "its capacity to mobilize strong emotions."[8] Questions could indeed be raised, as Vikram Doctor has done, as to whether she needs "the props of recipes to tell her story."[9] Doctor himself answers this question when he says, citing C. S. Lakshmi, that for women "unused to expressing themselves, but very used to cooking, getting them to talk about their food was a way to get them to talk about their lives." Although Alibhai-Brown herself, as an established writer, may not need food as a prop in order to tell her personal story, she is not simply telling her story alone but that of the many women who passed down their recipes to her, most notably her mother Jena. Food, in her work, is then a potent vehicle for the scripting of what may be called communal autobiography or auto-ethnography.

Jameela Siddiqi, a contemporary to Alibhai-Brown, was a student at Makerere University in 1972 when the order came through from General Idi Amin that all Asians must leave Uganda. She has since lived in Britain where she has pursued a career as a television documentary producer, developed a reputation as a leading critic-cum-producer of Indian classical music and more recently as a novelist. Like many ex-Ugandan Indians compelled to leave after Amin's expulsion order, she has expressed her fear that going back to Uganda, even for a brief visit, would be too painful to countenance, that returning would evoke strong feelings she would not wish to confront.[10] Writing is a way in which she tries to come to grips with the tortured connection with a place left behind, one to which return has become impossible, in spite of the policy of the Uganda government since the late 1980s to recognize the citizenship and property claims of

the expelled Asians. Her first novel *The Feast of the Nine Virgins*, which is discussed in this chapter, is an intercontinental and multi-generational saga about life in an Asian community in an East African country called Pearl in the 1960s before their expulsion (the name Pearl is an allusion to Winston Churchill's famous declaration in 1907 that Uganda was "the pearl of Africa"). The movement occasioned by the expulsion, among other factors, lies at the heart of the question with which the novel begins: "Born in Bombay, raised in Mombasa, married in Kampala, educated in London, worked in Tehran, lived in New York, then Stuttgart, then Hong Kong and then died in Vancouver. Where was this person actually from? Where is anyone from these days?" (1).[11] The "Pearl" plot is woven together with another, set in London in the 1990s, in which a movie is being made about a nineteenth century Indian courtesan spurned by a haughty classical musician named as the Grand Ustad ("He Who Lights up the Universe") with whom she was obsessed. The movie in question is funded by a rich man, once a lowly shopkeeper in Pearl, who insists that the producer makes a certain Bollywood actress feature in the film as the courtesan. As the novel comes to its Bollywood-style denouement, the characters involved in the making of the film come to realize their many lines of connection with each other and with the historical personalities in the film. Against the background of the riddles about identity and place spelled out in this highly experimental novel, food acts as one of the rare sources of existential certainty and thus an object of insistent nostalgia.

This chapter also focuses on Vassanji's second novel *No New Land* (1991) for, of his eight major works of fiction to date, it is the one that uses cuisine most extensively as a symbol and as an ordinary part of Indian East Africa culture. Reference is also made in this chapter to his first novel, *The Gunny Sack* (1989), which provides a dense and compelling portrait of the Indian presence in East Africa from the pre-colonial to the post-colonial period, and makes several important references to food. Discourse on food in *The Gunny Sack* is a particularly poignant index for cultural politics in the Indian communities of Tanzania, among whom Vassanji was raised in the late colonial and early post-colonial period.

Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, like other Asian East African writers such as Vassanji and Tejani, has written literary accounts of the Asian experience in East Africa against a background in which the writing of communal histories was seen either as an idle, or a dangerous, pursuit. In the prologue to *The Settler's Cookbook*, she notes that "East African Asians have been wary of written words and records which, once set down, can hold you to ransom, come and get you."[12] She notes that shortly after her mother's death in London after a long period of staying in the UK, relatives warned her not to write about her family's history because it would only "bring them shame" (*Settler's*, 13). Furthermore, for "practical, enterprising folk," as she describes her diasporic Asian community, "artistic expression or the life of

the imagination is thought a foolish waste of time" (14). Indeed, members of the community who seek careers as writers are usually met with the following question: "Can you eat books or put them in bank?" (14). This question is particularly interesting for the way it is premised on a competitive relationship between what is regarded as the idle, fancy pursuit of mere literature and the more immediate, survivalist need to earn one's food. It is with such in mind that Alibhai-Brown seeks to be one of the "keepers of our stories" (*Settler's*, 14). If the pursuit of food is, at least in popular consciousness, worthier than writing, Alibhai-Brown seeks as a chronicler of communal history to enlist food in the disparaged work of writing and historiography.

In her two autobiographies, *No Place Like Home* and *The Settler's Cookbook*, food is figured primarily as an instigator of memory and an object of nostalgia, in the face of the historical expulsion of Ugandan Asians in 1972. Food serves a mnemonic function in her life-writing for its unique ability to remind those who have migrated to new places of past episodes and the places they have left behind. The "mnemonic utility" of food, as Appadurai calls it, is given expression in the strong associations Alibhai-Brown makes between her childhood in Uganda and the variety of foods she had while there.[13] The brooding sense of melancholy that marks the two autobiographies is strongly focused on the tropical landscape of Uganda, for which she expresses a longing she realizes she cannot fulfill, except through the recreation of Asian-Ugandan food in the UK. She associates her Ugandan childhood with sharp and distinctive tropical flavors: "slices of sour, unripe mangoes dipped into a concoction of chilli powder, salt, sugar and Eno's Fruit Salt" (*Settler's*, 5). Indeed, the *terroir* of Uganda and the flavors it lends to food stands in contrast to what she regards as the plain and understated flavors of British food: "there was something special in Ugandan soil and water" (27). In contrast to the "quiet subtleties of English vegetation" which translate into equally subtle food stands "the wildness of the tropics" with its out-of-control flavors.[14] Being able to reproduce the tropical cuisine of Indian Ugandans in Britain therefore becomes an important measure of cultural and emotional survival. Indeed, it is the latter that explains Alibhai-Brown's choice in the course of her flight from Uganda in 1972 to take along with her "old pots and pans to England" (*Settler's*, 3). Just like the mementoes that she carries in her handbag—old photographs, extracts from the Koran, an old hanky that wiped her tears on her wedding day and so on—the pots and pans can be read as part of "an exile's survival kit" (*Settler's*, 2).

However, in the face of the exile's melancholy, Alibhai-Brown observes that eating becomes more than a means of survival; the voracious consumption of food by the Indian immigrants—just like the "feral sex" (*Settler's*, 292) in which some Indian Ugandan expellees indulged in the psychedelic 1970s—comes to stand for a desired sense of freedom, a break from the sensual restraint often associated with Indian life in East Africa, a losing of the

displaced self in pure sensation. There is, for instance, the decadent "Carrot *Halva*," a sweet confection whose recipe is included in the memoir. Made of grated carrots, butter, powdered full-cream milk, full-cream fresh milk, granulated sugar, cardamom seeds and sultanas, "Carrot *Halva*" gives an intense "sugar rush" (293), a temporary salve to the sadness of displacement. For Alibhai-Brown, this sweet confection marks out memories of a particular time in Britain in the wake of her departure from Uganda, a time in which the Indian expellees expressed pain through self-abandonment and rampant consumption. "Carrot *Halva*" can be seen, following Julia Kristeva's essay on the melancholic imaginary, as one of "suffering's pleasures," an expression of "lugubrious intoxication," in the sense that it encodes an ambivalent state of "dejection-exultation" on the part of the Indian expellees. Through food, the exile is able to turn suffering into an object of sensual pleasure, a strange combination that is, in Kristeva's terms, at the heart of "epochs of crisis," in which the grieving subject is driven both by narcissism and a desire for self-evisceration.[15] Indeed, as Vikram Doctor has noted in his review of *The Settler's Cookbook*, "Cooking is a therapy, a way of escaping life's insecurities by the small, but sure means of making a recipe work."[16]

To state that the decadent pursuit of pleasure is a key strategy through which the Ugandan Indian expellees cope with life in their early days in Britain in Alibhai-Brown's *The Settler's Cookbook* is not to deny the role she assigns to the conspicuous consumption of food among the Indians before their expulsion from Uganda. In her two memoirs, she shows that the intricate pattern of everyday Indian life in Uganda—including notions of gender, power, class, social status, morality, religious devotion, personal character and belonging—is in one way or another focused on food, making it possible to put the culinary and the gastronomical at the heart of a communal autobiography. In the early days of the colonial period, before the post –World War II era of affluence, as the immigrants struggled to make a living as small business owners or employees in the various sectors of the colonial economy, the staple foods were of a measly type, with dried beans, pulses and rice being the key ones. As Alibhai-Brown shows in *The Settler's Cookbook*, the laboring "coolies" who built the Uganda Railway ("The Lunatic Express") at the cusp of the twentieth century were restricted to a narrow diet comprising, among others, simple dishes such as "*Posho* and Rice," "*Khichri*" and "*Rotlo*." This was a time before vegetables and fruits known to the immigrants were widely cultivated in the interior of East Africa, meaning that they had to use what was available locally or otherwise make do with meager portions (indeed, the Swahili name *posho* is derived from the English "portion") of dried, long-life food provided to the Indian laborers by the railway-building authorities. The austere "*Posho* and Rice", for instance, is made of boiled kidney beans or the speckled pink beans commonly found in East Africa, red onions, all of which are fried in groundnut oil, seasoned with salt and chillies, and then served with rice. *Khichri*, also associated with

the indentured laborers who built the railway, is another simple dish, made of unhulled *moong dhal* (a green bean/lentil), butter, pudding rice, seasoning and served with condiments such as yoghurt or milk. Alibhai-Brown recalls that her dying mother received several boxes of this mushy, comfort food on her deathbed. To an immigrant community that later comes to attain affluence and a high social status, relative to their poor railway-worker forebears and to the African majorities, it is interesting that such recipes as those for *Khichri* and "*Posho* and Rice" are given fond treatment by Alibhai-Brown. A good explanation for this riddle is Appadurai's observation that the proliferation of Indian cookbooks in contemporary times is not only a middle-class phenomenon through which a national "polyglot culture" is instituted, but that such cookbooks also "belong to the literature of exile, of nostalgia and loss."[17] Cuisines that would otherwise be discarded for their peasant or working-class associations are recuperated precisely because the scenes of peasant and working-class life have been left behind—and because any such recuperation serves to provide foundational myths that hold the immigrants together in their present (dis)location.

In an important sense, Alibhai-Brown's memoirs smooth over the contradictions in immigrant Indian life in Uganda, even as she also registers moments of contestation and difference within the expatriate communities. She shows for instance, how food, its preparation and the manner of its consumption are powerful semiotic indices of gendered and class power. If women were generally denied public roles through limited formal education and their domestication, they turned the domestic work of food selection and preparation as a gendered province for their own self-expression. In *The Settler's Cookbook*, the author's mother, Jena, may have her horizons severely limited by the fact that she is not fluent in English and has had little formal education. However, she makes up for those narrowed horizons by using food as a strategic device to garner social influence, an approach that her more assertively feminist daughter sees as "more effective than the shouty tactics advocated by the sisterhood" for, indeed, "Everyone, even a feminist, loves a wife" (*Settler's*, 312). The burden placed on women to reproduce the immigrant community socially through the preparation of "traditional" food is turned into a resource by the women who take control of kitchens. Such women personify what Brinda Mehta calls "a paradox of positionality" in that they "[display] complete autonomy in the kitchen on one hand, while being enlisted to ensure cultural permanence as a means of safeguarding the interests of the group."[18] It is this paradox identified by Mehta in her study of female identity and creative cooking in Indo-Trinidadian fiction that is also at the heart of gastro politics in Indian East African writing. Although women in the literature have agency in regard to the preparation and allocation of food within their households, this very kitchen work puts them in a subordinate position relative to men, who with few exceptions take priority when food is served. The treatment

of male children in this way is instructive: "The coconut was broken, its sweet, cloudy juice drained into a glass which always went to the favourite child in the extended family, always a boy, always overweight and a bloody nuisance" (*Settler's*, 3). Alibhai-Brown paints a similar picture in her first autobiography, *No Place Like Home*: "Her [the author's mother, Jena] joy revolved around cooking my brother's favourite food and watching him devour it even if it was two o'clock in the morning" (*Settler's*, 17). Female subjectivity comes to be understood in terms of self-sacrifice, whose main tenet is the willingness to serve men, for indeed, "Having a man and his sons making impossible demands on you defined you as a proper woman" (42). It is such cultural expectations about female behavior that, in part, explain Alibhai-Brown's stated ambivalence about her first marriage, in the course of which a brother-in-law would demand fresh *chappatis* (a flat, unleavened bread of north Indian origin) at ten in the evening (*Settler's*, 79).

In Alibhai-Brown's memoirs, as the Indian immigrants in late colonial and early post-independence Uganda drift away from the poverty and hardship that was generally part of their early life in East Africa, so does their cuisine expand to include items of luxury. Those who were, like the author, born in the economic boom that followed the Second World War come to be called "*mtamu mototo* in Swahili," literally "sugar children … stuffed with the sweet foods believed to be essential for a happy childhood" (*Settler's*, 6). In *No Place Like Home*, she recalls her mother's pride in raising "a podgy baby, replete with expensive Cow & Gate milk" (39), a consumer brand name that for a displaced community is likely to evoke nostalgia for an irrecoverable time and place. In these and other passages, so central is food to the immigrants' sense of their history that it distinguishes different generations in their varying experiences of indulgence and hardship. If in the early years of Indian residence in Uganda "food expressed both desperate nostalgia and hardship" (*Settler's*, 16) in later years it comes to express both a sense of material comfort and the insecurities that come with being part of a highly visible and affluent minority. If "[h]appiness then was eating a mango" (16), it later comes to consist of "[f]lab on the body … one more symbol of gathering affluence and growing importance" (*No Place*, 6). This kind of extravagant display of comfort is especially pronounced in the late colonial and early post-independence period (1950–1972), a time during which many in the community measure each other's class status on the basis of "the amount of ghee floating on top of curries—[of which] less than two inches made you low class" (*Settler's*, 141). At the moment of the memoir's scripting, Alibhai-Brown observes that such reckless profligacy would render the offender "low class beyond redemption" (141). However, even in the earlier days in which fat-laden dishes were *de rigueur*, a small minority among the Indian immigrants who were in the professions—teachers, lawyers and civil servants—and even students taught by European teachers, tended to turn away from what they saw as the crass habits of poorly educated shopkeepers

who were in the majority. The author recalls that as a young snob educated in the English grammar school tradition of the colonial period, not only did she consider herself a scholar of Shakespeare who could make "authentic" English apple pies "and Victoria sponges as light as kites" (30), but was also repelled by the "crowd of *desis* [true natives of India] who speak Indian English and behave like villagers on a bus" (30). If major post-colonial writers such as Chinua Achebe and V. S. Naipaul have drawn attention to the role of language and landscape in colonial alienation—both showing how subjects educated in the colonies came to understand the aesthetic purely in terms of English literature and the objects depicted therein—Alibhai-Brown complements this earlier work by showing how alienation (and the class aspiration that informed it) was strongly focused on the culinary. These shifting indices of social status, as Alibhai-Brown renders them, shed light on how aspects of material culture are vehicles for telling personal or communal experience and for the imagination of senses of selfhood.

As seen above, food in Alibhai-Brown's work is a site of domination and resistance. In *The Settler's Cookbook*, she recalls how in neighboring Kenya, then dominated by European settlers, Whites-Only enclaves often had notices that read "Strong Smells Not Permitted" (102), a warning directed specifically at Gujarati Indian immigrants whose cuisines featured intensely aromatic spices. Readers of the Congolese writer Sony Labou Tansi may be familiar with the notion of *tropicalité* (tropicalities) through which he attempts to express what he regards as the excessive sensuality of life in the tropics, the cut-throat politics of "Third World"regimes, and also the highly idiosyncratic French that makes it possible for him to render in lively ways the "historical, geographic, and sociocultural" realities of the tropics.[19] In the context of Alibhai-Brown's memoirs, the notion of tropicality is deployed in an ontological contest fought between the food cultures of Indian immigrants inured to tropical luxuriance and that of British colonizers intent on enforcing temperate restraint and discipline: "The quiet subtleties of English vegetation do not prepare you for the wildness of the tropics" (*No Place*, 6). For her, therefore, food is a way of occupying colonial spaces assertively and in her exiled life in Britain, a means for avowing her Indian heritage even as she claims a sense of belonging in Britain. Indeed, she considers the making and consumption of Indian cuisine in British streets and homes as a kind of colonization in reverse, expressed poignantly when she makes one of the heirs of the British Empire—her second husband—"[fall] hopelessly in love with us natives and their grub which [they] were so sniffy about" (*Settler's*, 377). In the colonial Ugandan context, such assertion of the Indian presence in urban areas can be seen in the Indian cafes that "releas[ed] their aromas on to the streets and our clothes" (172) and also in the dish called "My Malodorous Packed Lunch" (175) that she insists on carrying to her uppity school. It is also instructive that she reads the excessive consumption of food by the Indian community in the early post-independence period as a

sign of resistance against the acquisitiveness of the new African ruling elite, a way of "eat[ing] up… wealth before the blackies got to it" (194).

It is clear from the foregoing that in her memoirs, food inscribes boundaries between communities (be they economic, racial, ethnic and religious) and also stands for different senses of selfhood. As Arjun Appadurai (1988) has observed in relation to contemporary India, "Food taboos and prescriptions divide men from women, gods from humans, upper from lower castes, one sect from another. Eating together, whether as a family, a caste, or a village, is a carefully conducted exercise in the reproduction of intimacy. Exclusion of persons from eating events is a symbolically intense social signal of rank, of distance, or of enmity."[20] In the Ugandan context of Alibhai-Brown's memoirs, this usage of food as a marker of difference and sameness can be seen in the fear of contamination held by some Indian families about black African domestic servants charged with the task of preparing food. As immigrant Indian families became affluent in the late colonial period, their demand for black domestic labor increased. This effectively meant that older rules of commensality and ritualistic purity, especially among caste-Hindus, that restricted the handling of food by Africans and other non-caste members had to be relaxed. It is in the process of such gradual changes that new human solidarities begin to emerge, as can be seen in the wistfulness of Alibhai-Brown's tone when she recalls her family's African house-servant, Japani, who made up for his meager pay "by selling his own distinct mango and lemon pickles" (*No Place*, 3) to Indian customers in Kampala. In a final gesture of recognition, the departing Indians from Amin's Uganda "invited their servants to eat and drink with them at their tables. Never happened before" (*Settler's*, 280). As indicated later in this chapter, it is such ordinary gestures of cross-cultural transaction that make it possible for the author to imagine a shared humanity in the face of the pervasive racial suspicion that led to the Ugandan Asian expulsion. However, this is not to suggest that food consistently promotes cultural and racial amity in Alibhai-Brown's memoirs. Indeed, the foods associated with different social groups are a significant source of hostility between such communities within the Indian Ugandan diaspora. In *No Place Like Home*, the author recalls how Hindu–Muslim tensions within the broader Ugandan Indian community came to be expressed through what may be called food-insults: "Shantaben Desai, before she absconded to India, would smile softly and ask the Muslims not to cook their meat in a pressure cooker because she threw up for hours afterwards and could not eat. Ma, who had little respect for people who survived on a bloodless diet, would coldly say that she too had felt nauseous when the dull, pervasive smell of dhal permeated the building" (*Settler's*, 75). As an observant Muslim, Alibhai-Brown's mother Jena distrusts the European teachers at her daughter's school, dismissing them as foul-smelling pig eaters: "They not only smell different, she claims, but they are hard-hearted men and women who put their babies into

nurseries and their old people into nursing homes" (*Settler's*, 81). Differences in food culture are in such instances seen by the antagonists—in highly comic and also tension-filled exchanges—as indicators of moral difference. In the aftermath of the Indian Partition of 1947, tensions grew among the Indian communities in East Africa, often finding expression in food insults, as is also seen in M. G. Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* (145).

In addition to its delineation of the symbolic and moral boundaries that divide communities, thus lending them their distinctiveness, gastronomic choice plays a further role in Alibhai-Brown's memoirs: that of shaping character. In exploring this dimension to gastronomy, Alibhai-Brown focuses on one man who is central in the intimate context of her family life, her father Kassim Damji, and two public figures who profoundly shaped Uganda's postcolonial history, Apollo Milton Obote and General Idi Amin. Of Obote, the man who led Uganda to independence in 1962, Alibhai-Brown suggests that his obsession with cleanliness and his overly formal ways of dining represented a clinical bloody-mindedness and a disguised capacity for cruelty. Soon after Amin overthrew Obote as head of state in a *coup d' état* of 1971, an old woman who cleaned rooms at Makerere University had warned young Alibhai-Brown about taking Obote's polished self-presentation at face value: "Don't ever trust a man who is too clean after he has eaten or killed" (*No Place*, 146). She observes that, although more people were killed in the course of Obote's rule in Uganda than under Amin, "he did not appear rough and obviously menacing like Amin did" (146). Obote's studied sense of refinement was apparent at one state banquet he hosted for Makerere University students:

> Obote was indeed terrifyingly ordered and tidy, especially when we were eating in the vast and beautiful state banqueting room with cutlery and crockery all inscribed as still Her Majesty's. Young women in black dresses and white aprons carrying soup tureens would visibly shake when they approached him because he hated a drop of anything going astray.
>
> (*No Place*, 148)

Amin, in contrast, was unrestrained and would joke even with those of a lower social standing, such as students. Asked by Alibhai-Brown, then a student leader, why there were no Indian recruits in the Ugandan army, Amin who was then the army leader responded as follows: "Because we do not eat *chorocco* [lentils] in the army. We are brave people, we Africans, we eat red blood meat. You are not African" (*Settler's*, 212). This response not only presages the expulsion of the Indians by Amin, but also suggests a connection between his love for red meat and his reign of terror. Amin is in some sense like the author's uncle, Chacha Ramzan whose inhumanity supposedly "came from the fact that he refused to eat vegetables" (*No Place*, 54). In tribute to the general, loathed for his mass expulsion of the Indians and

loved by some for making it possible for the refugees to flourish in other lands, Alibhai-Brown includes in *The Settler's Cookbook* a recipe she calls "Idi Amin's Favourite Exeter Stew" (241). The stew is not only an acknowledgement of Amin's bloody rule, but also a sly gesture at the hypocrisy of the British colonial establishment that tutored Amin in cruelty then later held him up as a figure of African buffoonery. In contrast to Obote, who ate elegantly like the Englishman of stereotype and Amin, who did so voraciously, the author's father, had all his teeth removed when he reached the age of 40, believing as he did that "eating was hardly a worthwhile human activity" (*No Place*, 86). This left him unable to eat anything apart from egg on toast and tea. Depicted by the daughter as a highly intelligent man alienated from the practical-minded Indian communities of Uganda by his idealism and bohemian streak, Kassim Damji failed in the many businesses in which he tried his hand. Alibhai-Brown reports that when she visited Uganda briefly in 1994 on a journalistic assignment, an elderly Indian businessman who had returned there to reclaim his confiscated property could not remember her father. Upon suggesting to the elderly businessman that the reason for his failure to remember Kassim Damji was because he was an exceptional failure in business, the old man remarked thus: "My dear it was very difficult not to make money here, to be a failure. Your father must have been a very special man" (*No Place*, 89). I draw specific attention to the case of Kassim Damji because it highlights the connection Alibhai-Brown forges between appetite and the will to live as a specific character trait. Kassim Damji's failures as a father, which account in part for the deep sense of loss, disappointment and trauma at the heart of Alibhai-Brown's memoirs, are symbolized in his poor appetite and his alcoholism.

If, as seen above, food delineates the boundaries between communities, Alibhai-Brown also strives to show how it can act as a bridge between hitherto hostile groups. *The Settler's Cookbook* in particular presents a variety of recipes for Indian-African and Indian-European fusion food, as products of both necessity (the fact that the immigrants have had to adapt to new environments with their unique produce) and a voluntary will to greater integration across the boundaries of race, religion and class. Food in Alibhai-Brown's work could therefore be seen as implicated in what Charles Taylor calls the "politics of recognition" (of otherness) within an ethic of multiculturalism.[21] If colonialism and religious rules have served to promote food snobbery, thus deepening conflicts between communities by granting them symbolic force, fusion-food serves as an index of adaptability, change and inter-cultural accommodation.[22] The most striking of the fusion foods whose recipes Alibhai-Brown presents in her memoirs is "*Matoke* [plaintain, a longstanding Ugandan staple] with peanut curry" whose roots she traces back to the initial encounter between Ugandan Africans and Indians in the late nineteenth century (62). Another notable fusion recipe is that for "*Ngonja* [a type of banana common in Uganda] in Coconut Cream," in

which the banana is cooked in rich coconut cream, and seasoned with cardamom and nutmeg. Yet another was "the *sanene*, the green locusts [that] swarmed the towns, twice a year . . . A few poor Asians would buy them and then make them into a dry curry claiming that they tasted just like small chicken's legs" (*No Place*, 123–124). She observes that in the early period of the Indian–African encounter, such "crossovers" were common, but "became rarer when class and race hierarchies were codified under colonialism" (*Settler's*, 62). In the aftermath of the Ugandan expulsion, and the scattering of the Indian communities in Britain, among other places, Alibhai-Brown observes that what they "wanted more than anything else was *matoke*, *mogo* [cassava] and mangoes, whatever the cost." Food thus becomes a way through which the expelled communities maintain a nostalgic connection with a place for which they have an ambivalent attachment. The assimilation of African food, although having no snob value in a colonial and post-colonial context in which the supposed inferiority of things African is widely accepted, is used by Alibhai-Brown to show that the Indians did not remain untouched by their African experience, thus confounding myths of cultural and racial purity (*No Place*, 123). The same could be said for Indian–European fusion food (key recipes being those for "Beef Wellington", "Chilli Steak", and "Jena's Shepherd Pie"), spiced-up versions of "tastelessly English" fare, which the author uses to undermine myths of English exceptionalism (*Settler's*, 198).

One of the key narrators and protagonists in Jameela Siddiqi's first novel *The Feast of the Nine Virgins* is the daughter to a snobbish Indian expatriate teacher in Pearl, Mrs Henara, who hates all things Indian apart from the cuisine. Named simply as "The Brat," the young narrator-protagonist is strongly drawn to the household of an Indian shop-keeping family, the Mohanjis, who are famed for their stinginess in all matters except food, which they prepare in plenty and offer to anyone who happens by. The Mohanjis fit neatly into the stereotype of the Indian East Africans: the stingy *dukawallahs* (shopkeeper) who care for little except material accumulation, a sense of family honor and the welfare of their own people. It is said of such *dukawallahs* by the movie producer in the novel that they "cared nothing for their own history or literature" (*Feast*, 23), a reputation that many East African Indian writers, starting with Bahadur Tejani, have tried to dispel. Indeed, the very act of writing fiction by Indian East Africans, as in Siddiqi's case, could be seen as subversive of the general outlook of their communities. The title of Siddiqi's novel is derived from a practice, common among members of the Ismaili faith and in East African Ismaili writing more specifically, in which a woman, having received divine blessings, thanks God by organizing a feast for nine or seven young girls whom she feeds lavishly (there is a similar scene in Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack*). The paradox in this particular case is that the celebrant, Mohanji's daughter the Widow, has no particular reason to celebrate, having had a string of misfortunes. Food in this multi-layered novel

plays the following roles: a statement of diasporic nationalism, an index of loss and nostalgia, an occasion for the enactment of cultural difference, a leveler of social distinctions, and a means for conviviality.

If the running theme that connects the disparate plots of *The Feast of the Nine Virgins* is the riddle of identity and belonging in the context of the global Indian diaspora, the preparation of "Indian" food and its consumption comes to stand for the ability of that diaspora to, in Amitav Ghosh's terms, reproduce Indian culture in a variety of locations.[23] This concern with Indian cultural reproduction in the context of a global scattering is captured in Siddiqi's repeated reference to the popular Hindi film tune " 'Mera juta hai Japani, yeh patlooni Inglistani' (loved by the Pearlite Asians for its crucial message that one's attire could be from anywhere, but one's heart was essentially Hindustani)" (*Feast*, 145). In the novel, food and music represent a "Hindustani heart," an irreducible minimum for a sense of India. The sense of disrespect that Mrs Henara shows towards things Indian—she refers to the shopkeepers as "these Indians" (144) while priding herself in her tolerance and cosmopolitanism—stops whenever it comes to food. She may provoke the Asian communities of Pearl by her extravagant display of love for black Pearlites, but her gastronomic tastes pull her right back into the communal fold: "She was educated. She had a profession. She didn't run a shop. She only went to the shop to buy spices. Yes, spices, for however European these Muhindis [Indians] might think they are, they never succumb to Europeanisation in matters of food. Indian food—the great uniter of all classes" (47). The aroma of spices and condiments—"haldi, chillies, dhaniya, all freshly hand-pounded in the backyard behind the shop" (11)—not only refers to the assertive ways in which the diaspora occupies urban space, but also of their ability to turn home—in its broadest sense of a domestic habitus and a country or locale of belonging, imagined or otherwise—into a portable artifact. Consider, for instance, the fond memory that the Brat, discouraged by her mother from fraternizing with members of a supposedly inferior class, continues to hold for the Mohanji household even after a long period in exile from Pearl:

> In spite of all his stinginess, there was a feeling of abundance in the Mohanji household. I knew the weekly menu by heart, being a persistent hanger-on. There was something magical about the Mohanji meals. There was never a shortage of delicious food . . . To this day, as a tribute to Mohanji's memory, I detest the very concept of a dining table . . . any number of guests or hangers on, like myself, could turn up unexpectedly and eat to their heart's content, making no difference to the family quota . . . It wasn't until I came to the West, many years later, and realised how Europeans measure out everything and literally count every single potato and pea, that I fully appreciated the Mohanji food magic . . . The curries were always a bright, bright red—not through excessive use of

> tomatoes, but through dried red chillies that were freshly pounded at home while still very red.
>
> (*Feast*, 46)

Scenes of feasting in Pearl become, in the moment of exile, symbols for a lost sense of conviviality and a sense of authenticity always under the threat of European modernity and rationalization. Pearl (Uganda) comes to be understood as Eden, a lost paradise, a time before the loss of innocence and organicity: "Not many five-year olds in the civilised western world of Kenwood and Magi-mixes and enclosed kitchens, could ever boast of having seen the birth of a samosa. I watched fascinated, as strips of pastry were deftly transformed into equilateral triangles, filled and fried in boiling karahis [frying pans] of oil" (123).

As in Alibhai-Brown's memoirs, food in Siddiqi's novel is a potent index for cultural difference, dividing even as it unites. For instance, the comically haughty Indian classical musician, the Ustad, who is hired to compose music for the movie under production in the novel, is known for his food snobbery. Handed a dessert menu at an Indian restaurant in England, his response is to ridicule the Bengali items on offer: "Ras Malai? No . . . these Bengali sweets are just milk, milk and milk. Now I remember my mother's carrot halwa. I wish I could describe the taste to you . . . it was like . . . just like Raag Kedar [a serious and contemplative type of Hindustani classical music] on a cold night" (*Feast*, 169). At one level, the Ustad's reaction to Bengali desserts draws attention to the very artificiality of the notion of "Indian cuisine," which is here exposed as a generic term for a vast array of South Asian culinary styles, some of them virtually unbridgeable. At another level, it shows, as Appadurai has argued, that in an important sense the idea of Indian cuisine is a product of transplanted or uprooted Indians "in search of their culinary pasts."[24] It is for the latter reason that whereas the restaurant is named by its owners as an "Indian" one, the Ustad, coming from India itself, is more sensitive to regional variations within the country. In some sense, then, pan-Indian food nationalism is a product of estrangement.

For the Ustad, culinary practices provide opportunities for ridiculing the exotic other, especially westerners and Africans, in a manner similar to that in Alibhai-Brown's *The Settler's Cookbook*. The ridiculing of western tastes is clearly expressed in his opinion as to what constitutes a properly prepared cup of tea:

> For the Ustad, tea bags were the second worst invention after condoms. And whoever heard of adding cold, uncooked milk to a cup of tea? Milk should always be cooked in the tea leaves. And it should boil furiously and simmer for ages until it took a rich pinkish colour. The equivalent of four spoons of sugar per cup should also be cooked in at the same time, along with a whole cardamom and a generous pinch of salt.
>
> (*Feast*, 170)

Among the Pearl Asians in Siddiqi's novel, the stereotype of black African laziness is widespread, with the Asians attributing African indolence to the natural bounty in the country, chief of which is bananas: "Useless African fellows, stealing from the shop, and who knows, entertaining lustful thoughts about their daughters as well. These Black guys had to be watched—they couldn't be trusted. Lazy as hell. They just sat around in the sun laughing and talking and eating bananas" (14). These piquant jokes about ethnic others not only express tussles over power in contexts structured by racial domination, but also reflect a desire to lighten the burden of racial conflict through humor.

However, Siddiqi not only draws attention to white and African butts of ethnic jokes, but also, for much of the novel, laughs at the foibles of Indian communities in pre-expulsion Pearl, their contradictions, obsessions, insecurities and defeated desires. For instance, although the Brat's mother (Mrs Henara) makes a constant show of her racial tolerance—on one occasion wearing a *busuti* (a garment worn by Baganda women) to the consternation of the blinkered *dukawallahs*—her treatment of black Africans is inconsistent. The Brat, in her precocity, sees through the mother's hypocrisy when the latter insists that a black servant cannot prepare a meal for an upper-caste temple singer on a visit to Pearl:

> Black hands cannot cook this kind of pure meal for a Brahman temple singer . . . 'But you're not Brahman,' I protest lamely knowing fully well she's going to say, 'But I'm Indian,' meaning she's one up on Black. Being Indian, even Indian Muslim, meant being one degree better than Black—at least in the temple scheme of things.
>
> (*Feast*, 204)

In spite of the restrictive culinary and gastronomic codes that govern the relations between members of different races, castes, classes and faiths, Siddiqi in her impish sense of humor draws attention to the final substance in the food cycle—shit—regarding it as the great leveler of social distinctions. It takes the juvenile, subversive vision of the Brat to arrive at this conclusion, which poses a challenge to the mutual racial hatred which, in part, led to the painful expulsion of the Pearl Asians:

> Visiting the toilet in that house [the Mohanji house] was always an adventure—both revolting and fascinating at the same time . . . In the normal scheme of things there wasn't much opportunity to study the intricacies of human excrement . . . One of my favourite games was to try and guess which shit belonged to which person. Shit, like blood, doesn't easily lend itself to that kind of analysis . . . A round world, supposedly whizzing around, so many languages, so many skin-tones, so many

> people—Dukavalla-class, Mechanic-class, Upper class, Maths, Science, Mosquito Servants, but why does shit always look like shit.
>
> (*Feast*, 70)

The African servant—the much derided "Bhangi"—who is employed by the Mohanjis to clean up human shit twice a day in the long-drop lavatory, turns out in the end as the dictator who expels the Asians from Pearl. The Bhangi is thus a fictionalization of General Idi Amin. Having acquired political power, the Bhangi issues the order expelling the Asians in revenge for their mistreatment of a woman he loves. As it turns out, the Bhangi has fallen in love with Mohanji's widowed daughter, known simply as the Widow. Upon her return to the Mohanji household after the death of her husband, the Widow has been exploited by her father, who employs her as a seamstress. To the central question in *The Feast of the Nine Virgins*—"Where is anyone from these days?" (1)—Siddiqi's response is that the answer is not that important after all, given that shit, like blood, is one of humanity's irreducible minimums. This vision of a common humanity is maintained by Siddiqi even as she turns a nostalgic eye to the specific times and places from which she feels she has been painfully separated. This sense of separation is also the subject of Vassanji's *No New Land*, to which I now turn.

When a group of Indian East African immigrants arrive in Toronto in M. G. Vassanji's second novel *No New Land*, they are met by welcoming committees of white Canadian Christians that provide them with clothes, food and Bibles. The narrator observes, wryly, that this is to be expected, given the popular assumption that people from Africa are "hungry pagans" "suffering dreadful diseases like beriberi and kwashiorkor" (*No New Land*, 49). In order to claim a sense of distinctiveness and dignity as Indian East Africans who belong to the Shamsi (Ismaili) sect of Islam in a context in which they are assigned generic and degrading "Third World" identities—as "hungry pagans" or "Pakis" (a pejorative term in British and Canadian contexts for South Asians)—the immigrants generally insist on their own dress styles, cuisines and religion. Food in the novel, as elsewhere in Indian East African writing, exceeds its basic function as a source of nourishment and comes to stand for a sense of dignity and history for the immigrants in a way that is at variance with the dominant image of Africa.

Indeed, the association of Africa with hunger and indignity is at the heart of one of the most haunting passages in *No New Land*. In the passage, set at a time before the migration to Canada, the main character Nurdin, a Tanganyika-born Indian, and his black African friend Charles stumble upon a group of starving villagers in the interior of newly independent Tanzania. Nurdin and Charles, both salesmen of Bata shoes, periodically travel from the relative affluence of the capital city Dar es Salaam to the rural hinterlands where the disturbing scene takes place. Nurdin recalls the encounter from the vantage point of Toronto, where he has been compelled to move by the economic and political reforms initiated by the new government of

independent Tanzania. The picture conjured in Nurdin's memory of the episode, one in which hungry Africans are prominent, is a familiar one, especially after the much-publicized Ethiopian famine of the mid-1980s:

> He and Charles had cooked some maizemeal and beans under an ancient tree, and while eating, quiet and absorbed, something had made them both look up. They saw an eerie sight that shattered their peace, that sent a shiver up Nurdin's spine. They were being watched. Some fifty yards away stood a group of people, black people in rags, in loose formation . . . Thin, emaciated, the women with sagging breasts and exhausted looks; the children with flies buzzing around their noses, eyelids, and sores; old, pathetic grey-haired men shorn of all dignity—all patiently waiting . . . The area was suffering a drought, he recalled. (170)

The scene is important for it is one of the very few times that Nurdin refers in any detail to his encounters with the realities of Tanzania beyond the affairs of his own urban-based Indian community. In a way that generally reflects the views of the Shamsi sect of Islam to which he belongs, he sees in food an index of difference, one that separates him from the black villagers and their world. Food not only comes to mark his racial and religious status as an Indian Muslim, it also brings into sharp focus the fact of his location as a member of an urban middle class in a largely poor country. However, his relocation to Canada threatens to disturb his sense of his place in the world, cultivated through the symbolism of food, among other factors. The very cuisine that would have marked him in East Africa as a member of an affluent community in Canada comes to be regarded as the sort of exotica that he and his family needs to give up if they are to become fully Canadian. The very things that spoke of his high status in East Africa now come to stand for inferiority in a new land in which his history is collapsed with that of the "Third World" as a whole.

The drama of Nurdin's social decomposition—he wonders in the novel when "he [began] to rot" (*No New Land*, 82)—is set in motion by a number of factors that attend to his attempt to make a successful crossing from his African past to his Canadian present. One of these factors is the overwhelming sense of guilt that he feels, having entertained desires that his dead father—a strict Muslim—would have disapproved. It is instructive that food and drink are an important part of the forbidden pleasures to which Nurdin is attracted in Toronto, as he finds himself caught between his old life in East Africa and his presence in Canada. His social decomposition—a result of his attempts to enact a crossing from the old world to a new land—is captured aptly through gastronomical tropes. He would like to immerse himself in Canada—a land about which the Shamsi had elaborate dreams even when they were still in Africa—but is equally anxious about the potential loss of cultural anchoring that migration poses: "Nurdin felt a certain foreboding, felt vaguely that he was making a crossing, that there would be no

return" (33). When his Indo-Guyanese friend Romesh, who has no dietary scruples, introduces him to alcohol, pork-sausage and pornography, these come to symbolize to Nurdin a sense of his own irreversible displacement:

> Even before he had finished swallowing it [pork sausage], as it was going down his gullet, everything inside him was echoing the aftertaste, crying, 'Foreign, foreign.' Yet it did nothing to him . . . The pig, they said, was the most beastly of beasts. It ate garbage and faeces, even its babies, it copulated freely, was incestuous. Wallowed in muck. Eat pig and become a beast. Slowly, the bestial traits—cruelty and promiscuity, in one word, godlessness—overcame you. And you became, morally, like *them*.
>
> The Canadians (*No New Land*, 127).

As his highly reflective friend Nanji reminds him, "once you've had it, the first time, tasted that taste so distinct you cannot cheat yourself, you are no longer the same man" (129). Gastronomic choice in this instance has a profound ontological significance, not only distinguishing the Shamsi immigrants from "the Canadians," but also symbolizing the process of estrangement that Nurdin undergoes as he attempts to effect a spiritual crossing from one land to another. To eat pork is symbolically to become another kind of human being altogether, a translated man, a beast.

However, Nurdin's social death does not mean that all the Shamsi immigrants in Toronto accept the fact of their displacement. Many of them, indeed, make elaborate attempts to recreate in Toronto the social textures and material cultures of their past African lives, a strategy of social reproduction that contradicts their desire to find a "new land" in Canada. For instance, Nurdin's wife Zera, invites an old Muslim cleric from Dar es Salaam, named simply as Missionary, so that he may help the Shamsi immigrants survive what she considers the heathen environment of Toronto. Zera's mission of religious revival is accompanied by the immigrants' obsessive transfer of cuisines from their old homelands to their new Canadian homes. Consider, for instance, the following description of the apartment block in which Nurdin and his family live:

> Whatever one thinks of the smells, it must be conceded that the inhabitants of Sixty-nine eat well. Chappatis and rice, vegetable, potato, and meat curries cooked the Goan, Madrasi, Hyderabadi, Gujarati, and Punjabi ways, channa the Caribbean way, fou-fou the West African way. Enough to make a connoisseur out of a resident, but a connoisseur of smells only because each group clings jealously to its own cuisine.
>
> (*No New Land*, 65)

Just as in Alibhai-Brown's *The Settler's Cookbook* and Siddiqi's *The Feast of the Nine Virgins*, food aromas in *No New Land* are means for the assertive

occupation of space by immigrants. To infuse the air of a city to which one has newly arrived with the aromas of another land is to state that one will belong in the city on one's own terms and not slavishly do as the Romans do. Nonetheless, there are in *No New Land* immigrants who yearn for belonging in terms set by their "hosts" and who therefore "find the smells simply embarrassing" (64). For such immigrants, the transplantation of cultural baggage by the Shamsis is an impediment to social integration. Against the simple logic that sets cultural assimilation against the ideal of cultural separatism, Vassanji's novel invites us to a complex cultural argument, one in which the immigrants' obsession with cultural conservation is itself a sign of their radical displacement. The Shamsis in *No New Land* may attempt to recreate Dar es Salaam in Toronto through the agency of Indian East African cuisines, but "[t]heir Dar, however close they tried to make it to the original, was not quite the same" (*No New Land*, 171). In their inability to produce carbon copies of their ancestral homelands, they embody Stuart Hall's argument that "Migration is a one way trip. There is no 'home' to go back to."[25]

Indian East African writers have taken a common aspect of material culture—food—and turned it into a powerful figure for exploring the joys and tribulations of being immigrants and refugees. In spite of the minor differences in their approach to the subject, the three writers given treatment in this chapter all show that although diasporic Indian cuisine lends itself as an instrument for the imagining of discrete communities, its consumption in multicultural contexts and its inevitable transformation lend to it a different kind of meaning: a means for imagining cross-cultural amity. Against the background of double-migrations—from India to Africa, and from Africa to North America and Britain—"food and food memories offer simultaneously a means of connection to particular places and people."[26] Food is thus an important means of accessing history as well as the substance of that history—a way of living "with the whiff of elsewhere *here*."[27]

# 4
# Imaging Africa, Making "Asians"

Ethnicity and race have occupied a key role in the socio-political struggles that have occurred in East Africa during the colonial and post-independence periods. However, within the atmosphere of the self-consciously secular and nationalist tradition of intellectual work in post-independence East Africa, there has been a reluctance to discuss ethnicity in any sustained manner. In fact, when ethnicity is raised as a topic for discussion, more often than not, it is viewed as something to be condemned rather than to be understood or explained. The indifferent or hostile attitudes that Africanists have taken in regard to ethnicity is best summed up by Leroy Vail who argues that they have generally been caught in the thrall of nation-building rhetoric, a perspective from which ethnicity is seen as retrogressive and divisive.[1] Understandably attracted to the promise of modernization and progress, such commentators have seen in ethnicity an obstacle to Africa's forward-march, a form of false consciousness and a relic of colonial "divide and rule" tactics. In this quest for progress, it has all too often been forgotten that ethnicity is not necessarily a primordial residue, but a relatively recent, artificial, modern phenomenon, and that to turn away from it in embarrassment is to ignore a key component of modern African history.[2] Notwithstanding the real dangers that ethnicity poses, the reluctance to speak about it in any other terms but condemnatory ones has deflected attention from the fact that it is but a way of understanding and staking claims to the world. Within East Africa, some of the most acrimonious debates about race and ethnicity have been around "the Indian question," the century-long debate about the place of the Asian diaspora in the region.

This chapter examines the writings of M. G. Vassanji, Peter Nazareth and Bahadur Tejani, and discusses how the images of Africa in their works are a window into the historical production of race and ethnicity. I begin from the premise that although modern stereotyping and the more general representational labor that goes with it cannot fully account for ethnicity and race, it is an important aspect of their constitution and therefore merits attention. As Indians and Africans encountered each other, in colonial contexts

fraught with tension and competition (and also much exchange), so did they try to grapple with the new predicament by describing themselves in relation to one another, and the places with which they were coming into contact. Charles Sarvan, for instance, has written about how African writers have depicted Asians, in settings as varied as the slum yards of apartheid South Africa and the market villages of central Kenya.[3] Although he does not address himself to this, such representations of the Asians have played an important role in constituting the Africans as a people, as distinct people. For instance, the Indian traders of Marabastad, in Ezekiel Mphahlele's *Down Second Avenue*, in all their perceived aloofness from the suffering of African peoples, act as a background against which the author imagines a new racial consciousness in the face of modern dislocation. This fabrication of a new consciousness in the slum yards is done with the Other in mind, hence its negative orientation, and hence Sarvan's urge to distance himself from it. He therefore concerns himself with correcting the negative stereotyping of the Asian African diaspora, but pays little attention to why the writers in question would want to produce the particular images of the diaspora and, in turn, of their own communities. The end result is that the production of ideologies of race and ethnicity begins to seem like a perversion, a pathology about which the less said the better. Stereotype ceases to be a category for knowledge, but is only discussed in order to be dismissed. Its discursive function is not considered beyond the casual observation that it is a form of scapegoating, a substitute for the hard work that needs to be undertaken if a prosperous nation, and a harmonious multiethnic and multi-racial society is to be built. There is, of course, much that is true about such a position, but it is evidently also a form of avoidance. If stereotyping is simply a way of "making scapegoats of racial minorities than in undertaking painful reconstruction," why is it that stereotyping is also so markedly evident in Indian representations of Africa and Africans?[4] Understandably apprehensive about negative images of Asian Africans in the post-independence period, Sarvan seems to forget that there is a long history to Asian images of Africans, which have served an important function in the production of diasporic Asian identities. Given the uneven development within colonial territories, privileged groups would mobilize along ethnic and racial lines in order to justify and perpetuate privilege, in the same manner that underprivileged communities would invoke ethnicity to contest their exclusion. Even in the case of groups that had done relatively well in the new capitalist order, ethnicity provided a comforting sense of community in the face of atomization and radical displacement.[5] Against the best wishes of a liberal conscience, ethnicity continues to have a currency in the post-independence period, and it is not adequate to treat it as an aberration that is doomed to disappear. Beyond the impulse for disapproval is the need for greater understanding of the actual processes through which ethnicity is engineered and imaged into being.

This chapter focuses on the depiction of Africans in the literature of the Asian diaspora of East Africa and considers the role that this plays in the invention of notions of Asianness in the African context. Although it would be unhelpful simply to assume that the diaspora only developed ethnic and racial consciousness upon their arrival in East Africa, it is important to recognize that historical conditions in East Africa played a role in the creation of Asian identities different from anything in the Indian sub-continent itself. Indeed, in the East African diaspora, an omnibus Indian or Asian identity would acquire a kind of weight that would not be possible in the sub-continent itself. This consciousness of difference was not merely foisted on the diaspora from without, but was also fashioned from within in response to historical adversities. To the European colonizers and African nationalists who inveighed against the "Asiatic menace" the diaspora responded by mobilizing Indian identity through organizations such as the East African Indian Congress. This chapter considers how the diaspora actively imagines itself as a community by marking out its borders in relation to the "African Other" in the works of Moyez Vassanji, Bahadur Tejani and Peter Nazareth. A word of caution, though: I read the texts primarily as a window into the historical contexts about which the writers reflect, and only secondarily as bearers of the writers' world-views. I do this primarily because the works of these writers are informed by a marked sense of ideological indeterminacy, making it impossible to grant any particular view a dominant place within their writing. Vassanji, Nazareth and Tejani operate in an ironical mode, which enables them to be both insiders and outsiders in relation to the diasporic Asian communities whose lives they narrate.

Commenting on Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack*, Amin Malak notes that "a stark cleavage" exists "between the native Africans and the Asian-Africans."[6] Sarvan has also noted this sense of separateness in his study on ethnicity and alienation in East African Asian writing.[7] Within the fictional world of the literature, this sense of racial separation is fortified through a number of symbolic practices in which the characters engage. It is precisely through such symbolic mediation that specific ideological positions on economic and political issues are articulated and then popularly accepted. However, what form does this mediation take? What are the cultural codes through which these important partisan meanings are transmitted? Perhaps the most crucial of such symbolic practices revolve around the development of what Anne McClintock calls the "cult of domesticity."[8] The development of this ideology, whose echoes are indeed found in the Asian diaspora depicted in the literature, entails the invention of exclusivist, and often anxious, understandings of the home. In this ideology, domestic spaces (as racial, ethnic, national or familial enclaves) are conceived as inviolable private domains, to be defended from the strange world outside, which in turn has to be domesticated in order to be rid of its disturbing otherness. McClintock makes a further point that within British imperialism the ideology of domesticity

involved the usage of the iconography of gender as its central trope. A similar process occurs among the Asian African diaspora that Vassanji and Nazareth write. It is precisely through the figure of the woman that the diaspora depicted in the literature defines its own frontiers, the woman's transgression of such strictures becoming the cardinal threat to what Vassanji calls the "khandaanity" (the family-ness) of the patriarchy (*The Gunny Sack*, 68). The character of the Indian, Shamsi, or Goan woman defines the diaspora's sense of its own cultural boundedness. Generally, the language used in highlighting racial and ethnic boundaries in the literature takes a sexual slant, marking sexuality as a terrain for inscribing difference. Sexual desire and its management thus act as signs of racial and ethnic power.

At the center of the institution of the family (which is the basic social unit through which the community reproduces itself and which provides the key element in the rhetoric of domesticity) are women, whose symbolic significance is emphasized in inverse proportion to their actual autonomy or social power. The discourse of domesticity is further fortified by notions such as purity, honor and shame that govern gender, caste and racial relations in the texts. A key focus of the ideology of domesticity is the body, whose relation with other bodies is closely regulated, to forestall the risk of disturbing racial and ethnic boundaries. This concern with the body is mostly directed at women, whose basic role is defined as that of ensuring that the community reproduces itself in both a cultural and biological sense. Those who lie outside the limits of the community are often perceived as posing a threat to the sense of continuity that the women represent. In consequence, the outsiders, primarily the Africans, are represented in ways that reinforce the ideology of separateness.

The narrators of Vassanji and Nazareth's prose-fiction echo Orientalist procedures of describing non-Western societies. Although his exoticized descriptions of the African continent could simply be a way of capturing "the spirit of times past," Salim Juma (or "Kala," meaning "black"), who narrates Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack*, seems to be very implicated in the language of imperialism that he excoriates and tries to transcend by a discourse of multiculturalism. His relationship with the African landscape, although different, is not marked by a fundamental departure from that of V. S. Naipaul's Salim in *A Bend in The River* which is one of his intertexts.[9] Just like it does for Naipaul's Salim, Africa for Vassanji's Salim fundamentally oscillates between the image of its terror to newcomers and a sense of the continent's feminine vulnerability that calls for its domination by a superior foreign male. The narrator of Nazareth's *In a Brown Mantle*, Deogratius D'Souza, on his part figures Africans as sexually liberated beings. In his search for release in the "pulsating universe" of Africa, as he calls it, he seems not to recognize the exploitation involved in that very process. In this sense, D'Souza is a lot like Keval, the protagonist of Jagjit Singh's play "Sweet Scum of Freedom," who is similarly oblivious of how his apparently transgressive visitations to

African prostitutes only reinforce the logic of racialism that he deplores in the post-independence African elite.[10] As an allegory of race, Keval's relationship with the prostitutes buttresses the patriarchal colonial discourse of a feminized, submissive Africa.

Although I borrow from Edward Said's concept of "Orientalism" to explain the particular narrative paradigm in which Africa emerges as dark, irrational, sensual and violent—"Africanism" is perhaps a better word—it is important to make some qualifications about its applicability in this case since the European–Middle Eastern relations to which Said refers are different from the Indian-African interaction depicted in East African Asian writing.[11] Orientalism as Said describes it is "the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short . . . a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."[12] The Orient that is produced in such a process relies very little on the Orient itself, but on the displacement and exclusion of the voices of those thus interpellated as Orientals; indeed, such a figure of the Orient and the Oriental is not "a delivered presence, but a *representation*, or a representation."[13] Orientalism marks the ascendancy of the European imagination over an Orient which therefore provides the basis upon which a sense of European identity is established—negatively. Said sees in Orientalism the "universal practice of designating in one's mind a familiar space which is 'ours' and an unfamiliar space beyond 'ours' which is 'theirs'."[14] But, if the practice of Othering is universal, what then makes Orientalism worthy of note? Imperialism, so Said argues, enabled Europeans to entrench their imaginary geographies about other places and peoples through powerful institutions, such as the means of disseminating information, the control of land and the use of military power on a vast scale. Using the term "Orientalism" to describe diasporic Indian representations of Africa therefore comes with risks, for the Asian Africans never quite had the control over Africans that the Europeans have had over the Middle East. Unlike Arab aristocracies, which historically ruled East African coastal city-states, the Indians at no time controlled any parts of East Africa militarily, save for the early colonial period when the British deployed small detachments of Indian soldiers to quell rebellions. Unlike the European colonizers of East Africa, Indians have never had control over vast pieces of land in East Africa; indeed, even in pre-colonial Zanzibar where they wielded considerable influence, the land was owned by Omani aristocrats. Due to the relative weakness of the Indian hold over the means for disseminating information—established bodies of scholarship, schools, newspapers, publishing houses, etc.—any images of Africa that the immigrants devised could never quite attain a hegemonic status. What then is the logic of these images? Do they fall in the realm of wish-fulfillment, comforting myths that enable the immigrants to imagine themselves in relation to black Africans? Is the imaginary

geography of Africa inscribed in such images a strategy for domesticating an unfamiliar world in the universal sense to which Said alludes, or does it have a specific function that requires elaboration? Are the images indicative of the fears that the immigrants have about East Africa? In purveying these images, are the immigrants simply regurgitating in a passive way European colonialist discourse, or do the images serve the particular interests of their communities? Should they be read instrumentally as indicators of class or political interest, or should their relative autonomy as aesthetic categories be acknowledged? Whatever the answers one might provide to such questions, it is clear that the exoticized images of Africa are limited, not because they mis-cognize African realities, but because they run a detour around what Africans have to say about themselves. Exotic images of darkness, violence and excessive sensuality displace the actual complexity of local experiences and histories. The production of an Indian identity in this sense thus depends on the silencing of the Other whose character and history is reduced to a fixed set of images.Yet, to accept that the negative production of Africa was an inevitable historical process is not adquate, for to do so would be to dismiss the possibility of positive knowledge of the continent by the migrants. Indians and Africans were never fated to know each other only through myth. In keeping with this view, the test for a work of art dealing with the African-Indian encounter is whether it manages to point to the possibility of knowledge beyond the evasions implicit in flattened, mythical portraits of the Other, or whether it succumbs to the mystifications produced within the colonial situation to rationalize domination.

I am not arguing that the descriptive acts, which I delineate in this chapter, have their provenance in nineteenth and twentieth century European imperialism alone; in fact, it is quite possible to trace some of these practices to earlier moments of African contact with the outside world. Relations between the regions in the Indian Ocean world, although longer and seemingly less acrimonious than the one between Africa and the West, have not always been informed by a sense of equipotence amongst the actors. No less than the relationship with the West, interactions between Africa and South-Western Asia have been asymmetrical, thus laying the ground in which the disparaging imaging of Africa has taken root. The Indian Ocean trade in African slaves seems to have contributed to discourses about "the African difference" that one finds in such a foundational text of South-Western Asian prose-fiction as *The Arabian Nights* (also known as *The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night*) in which African slaves are figured as the epitome of bodily and sensual excess. This fixation on the exotic is reproduced in the opening chapters of Vassanji's novel *The Gunny Sack*, in which the island of Zanzibar and the African interior is Othered. In history, Zanzibar (sometimes spelt as Zinjibar or Zanguebar, "the land of the blacks") always bore the distinction, right from the middle ages, as the place of adventure for many in the mercantile societies of South-Western Asia,

just as Africa and India later did in the European colonial imagination.[15] Indeed, the influence of *The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night* on Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* goes much further than its reflection in the attitudes of the pioneer Indian merchants to Africa, for the organizing trope in the novel is drawn from this Ur-text of Muslim-Arab narrative fiction.[16] At the center of Vassanji's novel is the gunny sack that the narrator, Salim Juma (Kala), inherits from his grandaunt, Ji Bai. Salim christens the gunny "Sherbanoo," an idiosyncratic translation or renaming of Schehrazade, the female narrator of *The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night*. Narratives such as the *Arabian Nights* would have been in circulation during Vassanji's youth in East Africa, but they would also have had a presence in the predominantly Muslim part of North-Western India in which he traces his ancestry. In addition, copies of the stories were in wide circulation in colonial and post-independence East African schools, as in my own encounter in a Kenyan primary school with the Oxford University Press edition of *Sinbad the Sailor* (1959), as retold by Maryan Dingle. These stories were favorites in the colonial library for they conjured up, in translation, exotic worlds which fit well within Orientalist lore.

In addition to the history of the enslavement of Africans in the Middle East is the crucial question of how longstanding attitudes to color within the Indian sub-continent may have contributed to the way in which Africans would be perceived in the Indian Ocean coast of East Africa. The caste system of South Asia has historically used color as one of its building blocks. It should therefore not be entirely surprising that the images of Africans produced by the Asian diaspora would reflect the prior knowledges developed in the much longer history of the caste-system. It is important to keep the caste system in mind because much of the Othering of Africans that the texts in question reflect is quite similar to upper caste representations of lower castes.

Taken together, the writings examined in this chapter depict at least three important periods in East African history: the age of Omani-Arab rule on the East African coast, the era of European colonial rule and the post-independence period.[17] This kind of periodization cannot account for every important moment in the body of works under discussion, but is still important for unlocking the question of the changing, complex nature of racial imagineering. It is crucial to cast into sharp relief such a complex historical mosaic because some of the images of Africa and Africans that we see depicted in East African Asian writing have been borrowed from a variety of sources, among them, the imperial library, canons of knowledge from the Indian sub-continent, the writings of the global Indian diaspora, knowledge accumulated in the epoch of Persian and Omani interaction with the East African coast, and finally from the hotchpotch of all the above that partly informs contemporary cultures in the region. However, such a syncretic culture has become such an ordinary feature of everyday life in the region that it is accepted as normative, and its variegated origins are sometimes forgotten.

In certain cases, memories of the earlier epochs etched in it are blotted out in favor of a deterministic history that privileges the role of the European intervention in the making of the region. Although this chapter recognizes the importance of colonial discourses in defining the discourse of race and ethnicity in East African Asian literature, it also notes the place of these earlier histories of trans-Indian Ocean cultural transactions in the process.

## "There is a beautiful country, but it has no law": Telling the initial encounter with Africa[18]

In Vassanji's fiction, there are wide periodic shifts in the way in which African characters and the African landscape are described. Although the outlines of such changes are not entirely well-defined, one can discern a pattern that is closely related to the major historical developments in the region, which are also delineated in the literature itself. So shaky and vulnerable is the basis of knowledge that the images used to describe Africans and Africa change markedly as historical events unfold. What are these historical changes that form the backdrop to the events narrated, and how are such changes in turn reflected in constructions of the "African" as depicted in the literature?

In *The Gunny Sack*, which spans a whole century from the 1880s to the 1970s, the initial encounter between the Shamsis (a fictional name for Ismaili Indians) and the East African coast is often expressed in gendered terms. Salim, the narrator, casts the incoming Indian presence in masculine terms and the African space in feminine terms. In this scheme, the influence of India is seen as one of insemination and civilization, while the role of the East African landscape in the encounter is one of passive acceptance. Africa occupies, within this patriarchal scheme, a feminized subjectivity, ostensibly devoid of desire. India, on the other hand, is a phallic entity, a wielder of the law whose paternal authority enables it to write its subjectivity on the prostrate African country.

The native landscape, often figured as a jungle or bush, is seen by Salim from an essentially a male, Indian and heterosexual perspective. He describes Matamu, the new coastal trading settlement, as the place "Where Africa opened its womb to India" (39–40).[19] It is at Matamu that Dhanji Govindji, Salim's great-grandfather, buys and marries an African slave-woman named Bibi Taratibu. Salim's phrase about Africa "opening its arms to India" elides the history of Taratibu's purchase. In Salim's logic, it would seem that Africa "opens its womb" as a participant in a consensual conjugal relationship. The African continent, especially the interior, is equated to the treacherous women of Zanzibar, "isle of enchantment" (8), who, like sirens, lure the male Indian arrivants into their treacherous arms.

In Salim's narrative, the historical agency of "pioneer" males is temporarily disavowed when the frontier landscape is described as "enchanting."

By describing the country in this manner, Salim seems to be suggesting that the country desires its own conquest. In yet another passage, Salim says about Africa that "One could go deeper and deeper into it and perhaps never return" (32). However, the imaging of Africa as a swallowing monster is undermined by the reality that the male Indian pioneers have indeed been purchasing African women slaves and keeping them as concubines.

The presentation of the East African coast and its seaboard as a passive place is not accidental, or merely incidental to *The Gunny Sack*. It recurs in Vassanji's later novel *No New Land*, in which the trading post of Bagamoyo is said to have "opened its arms to sultans, slave traders, ivory merchants, missionaries, explorers, and shopkeeper-moneylenders" (12). This version of the region's history is marked by an interest in overwriting the history of native displacement in the wake of the Indian Ocean slave trade. As such, the claim that the encounter is consensual appears contrived. The land and the African people are presented as a willing hostess to those who want to assert their rule over it. The Canadian critic Arun Mukherjee has remarked on this feminizing of Africa in *The Gunny Sack*. She is particularly interested in how the invocation of India as "Mother" in Indian nationalist discourse is overturned in the novel, where India becomes male and Africa female. She convincingly argues that the feminizing of Africa is in fact "an allegory of exploitation," "a trope for Indians' relationship to their adopted land."[20]

It needs to be noted that the above figurations of East Africa as a treacherous and pliable female coincide with a period in which colonialism is at a nascent stage in the region and also with late Omani-Arab rule on the coast. Africa is depicted as the empty land that invites male exploration. In accordance with this logic, Taratibu (an embodiment of the African landscape) remains a passive presence in Govindji's life. Even her very name, *taratibu*, is the Kiswahili word for passivity and politeness. In the world that the Shamsi pioneers fashion for themselves, the historicity of Taratibu is discounted. She is restricted to the status of an empty womb that provides the male pioneer with a terrain for cultivation, while remaining herself agency-less and without desire. It is only at the very moment that Salim writes, from the vantage point of his post-independence exile in North America, that he attempts to speculate about her desires and to uncover her submerged histories.

Beset by a sense of guilt over his chequered ancestry, Salim (who is himself a great-grandson to Govindji and Bibi Taratibu) seeks to unearth the suppressed life story of Taratibu, only to find it is beyond full recovery. The whole of *The Gunny Sack* is Salim's attempt to come to terms with his African ancestry, but at the end he has not really pieced together Bibi Taratibu's history, for the traces of this history were largely been obliterated by the activities of the slave traders. Taratibu, like her son Huseni, makes a complete exit from Matamu never to be seen again, and only to be resuscitated from oblivion by Salim's narrative. In launching into this narrative quest for his African roots, Salim is undermining the very basis of his identity as

diasporic Indian. His search for this submerged aspect of history threatens to render unstuck the myths through which the diaspora fashions a pure genealogy for itself. In the family romance that Salim's mother fabricates, "black ancestry [is] not something [to be] advertised" (150).

Some of the most memorable anecdotes in Salim's narrative can be found in the earlier parts of the novel where he presents the tribulations of the Indian merchants who were not yet established in their new areas of settlement. Yet the very metaphors used to capture that sense of vulnerability are shot through with meanings that suggest something else. For example, during the First World War in German-controlled Tanganyika, the Shamsi feel a distinct sense of dislocation in the interior. However, the very terms in which they express their precarious position is quite telling about their role as secondary colonialists: "If the British attack, the Africans can run into the bush, but where will you run?" (48). There is a sense of double-meaning here, for although the black African claim to autochthony and ownership of the country is acknowledged, that gesture is simultaneously withdrawn for it is suggested that the native is synonymous with natural landscape.

Vassanji's fiction generally engages in a parodic repetition of the diaspora's inscription of Africa as a passive presence. In both *The Book of Secrets* and *The Gunny Sack*, the presence of Africans in the East African setting is rarely ever registered strongly in the pre-colonial and early colonial years. Bibi Taratibu might occupy Salim's narration of this distant past, but she does not do so as a speaking subject. It is only when Salim encounters and falls in love with Amina in the post-independence period that he is able to deal with the perspectives of an African character in a sustained way. He might wish to render transparent the life of his grandmother, Bibi Taratibu, but realizes that it is closed off to his knowledge by the myths of African silence that were pervasive in her time.

## "What Good Times We Had": The violation of a colonial Arcadia[21]

There is a significant shift in the diaspora's attitudes to Africa in parts of Vassanji's fiction that cover the late colonial period, roughly 1945–1960. In this period, the diaspora finds itself torn apart between African nationalist radicalism and the reluctance of the British colonial government to give up power. Although there are a number of Asian characters who actively support African nationalism, there are many others who experience the events of this period with a sense of unease. Constantly, they perceive Africa as a place of menacing darkness, mitigated by the little islands of safety that they have fashioned in their urban dwellings. The enchanting character of the Africa of early colonialism changes into images of terror and dread, as is evident in Salim's usage of a motif of darkness in his descriptions of Dar es Salaam of the time (87–88). Kariokoo, the place that strikes terror in Salim's

heart is where the "native" African quarter begins. Between Kariokoo and the Indian and European quarters lies the Mnazi Moja grounds—a cordon sanitaire that keeps the "darkness" away from the Asian territory and Uzunguni (the European quarter) with its magnificent "whitewashed" facades and a "dreamlike" ambience (85). The native town is frightening to Salim for he fears getting lost in its "maze of criss-crossing, unpaved streets lined with [...] huts (85). However, the menacing nocturnal darkness is not just a property of the African quarter; it also lies within Salim's own home, "in the outhouse at the back." Lying as it does within the very confines of the family compound, the darkness is an intimate part of the self, which Salim then projects at whatever lies outside. This mystery in the outhouse is like the "stranger" in ourselves whom we project onto others, a point that Julia Kristeva makes in *Strangers to Ourselves*.[22] Salim has a chance to dismantle the colonial logic that assigns the racial groups distinct spaces in the urban area, but the Shamsi have a stake in such an architectural arrangement. Hence, Salim's ironic detachment from the implications of segregation. This may be an ungenerous reading of Salim's fear, for the darkness that terrifies him is also a metaphor for the alienation that the Shamsi feel, having migrated.

Significantly, darkness in Vassanji's narratives is mostly associated with African beggars, criminals, mystics and lunatics. There is "the shadowy African mugger" who terrorizes Salim and his boyhood friends in *The Gunny Sack* (112), the demented beggar of Kichwele Street who "comes out of the shadows" in "The Beggar" (*Uhuru Street*, 29), and the mysterious African muezzin who presides over the night "The Sounds of the Night" in *Uhuru Street*. Consistently, the Shamsi are at the receiving end of such darkness. Not only are these representations a commentary on the vexed class relations that are closely aligned to the contours of racial identification, they also reflect the widespread idea that Africa is a "cultural vacuum."[23] The darkness can be read in two ways, the first being that Africa is ready for cultural enlightenment, and the second being that the continent resists all such attempts to illuminate it. In the period immediately after their arrival in East Africa, the diaspora may well have "struck out in the wilderness in the wake of the railway" (*The Gunny Sack*, 63), subduing what Salim's narrative constructs as a blank territory. In the period of the Mau Mau insurgency in Kenya, and during the late colonial period more generally, the fact that there are "people living there with their own cultural matrix and their own relationship to the environment" becomes unavoidable.[24] Upon this realization, the poetics of mastery quickly change into lamentations of victimhood.

If at first the immigrants see colonial Nairobi as an "Eden" that they have cultivated themselves, it quickly transforms into an Armaggedon during the Mau Mau crisis:

> Beautiful, beautiful Nairobi. But all was not well in this Eden; there were rumours, rumours in government offices and the big stores that supplied

> them, rumours in bars and clubs . . . of an evil secret society . . . and a fear rustled ever so slightly in the background, rearing its head sporadically like a devil toying with children, with a murder here and a fire there. The dreaded words were Mau Mau. (74)

Vassanji shows that the very idea of colonial Kenya as an "Eden" depends on a selective process of cognition, in which African grievances are denied. Although the diaspora see Nairobi as the very recreation of a lost paradise, there is a lingering fear and guilt that those whom the civilization marginalizes as "natives" are the very same ones upon whose labor and resources the colonial Eden depends. Vassanji highlights this disjunction between colonial discourse and the history it manufactures in a much more clear way than Karen Blixen, whose novel *Out of Africa* insists on a pastoral idyll in which there are almost no contradictions.[25] Given that the Asians occupy a tenuous position in the racial hierarchy of colonial East Africa, their response to the nascent African political movements is shot through with several contradictions. The crushing of Mau Mau may be the cause for a consuming guilt on the part of Salim's family, but it is also an occasion for celebration and for heaving "sighs of relief" (75). The family feels a sense of guilt for having betrayed one of their close black Kenyan friends, but also a measure of elation, for they have been spared much of what they perceive as Mau Mau terror.

Whereas in the parts of his fiction that deal with the colonial period there is a much more assured tone on the part of the characters, in the post-independence period, Vassanji's Indian protagonists feel constantly besieged. The period after independence in East Africa was a tumultous one, which deeply affected the fortunes of the South Asian diaspora in the region. In 1964, there were military mutinies in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, an occurrence that would have magnified in the eyes of the diaspora the fragility of the new states. At the same time, the new governments sought to consolidate power by redistributing resources for the benefit of select Africans. This entailed the Africanization and nationalization of private businesses, most of which belonged to the diaspora. Such political practices received some hostility from the ranks of the diaspora who had themselves been partially engineered into a middle class by the colonial government. Even more terrifying was the Zanzibari Revolution of 1964, organized by John Okello. In this instance, a motley crew of peasants, laborers and sharecroppers rose up against the Omani-Arab dynasty and the Asian diaspora in Zanzibar.[26]

All the above developments are read as the sign of worse things to come by the Shamsi in Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack*. In spite of the fact that overt violence against the diaspora occurs in large scale in Zanzibar alone, and that the act of expulsion happens in Uganda only, Vassanji's protagonists in mainland Tanzania live in chronic fear of violence and dispossession.

That East African countries were interlinked in crucial ways cannot be denied; what is striking though is the way the Shamsi protagonists write off in their minds the differences between the countries. In their view, Julius Nyerere's reformist line is no different from the violence of Okello's Zanzibar and the militarism of Amin's Uganda. It seems that in trying to think through the insecurities of the time, the diaspora conjured up elaborate notions of "the black peril," not unlike the Kenya European settlers who had, at an earlier moment, fabricated notions of the Indian immigrants as "the terrible Asiatic menace," an appellation that bedevilled the diaspora in early colonial Kenya.[27]

The Asian departure from East Africa, as Vassanji suggests, was not simply the result of their victimization by the African nationalist state but of the disturbance of the racial hierarchies of colonialism after independence. In the short story "What Good Times We Had" in *Uhuru Street*, Vassanji shows how the racial, master–servant relationship had bred in the Asians complacency about their superior status. The woman at the center of the story only comes to confront this history of complacency moments before she is killed by a resentful African bank clerk whom she approaches to supply her illegally with foreign currency so that she may leave Tanzania. She wonders whether he is one of the many Africans she has encountered before:

> The hatred she saw there she had never seen in a pair of human eyes before .... and she thought of all the black men she had presided over almost all her thirty-seven years with scorn. The houseboys, the tailors, the customers, the hawkers, who came with the dawn, subservient, and disappeared into the night. Who no more belonged to her community of men and women than the flies on the walls .... Was this revenge, or plain avarice?
>
> (*Uhuru Street*, 95)

Colonial hierarchy, as Vassanji depicts it here, had given Asians a false sense of security, which had in turn encouraged them not to take seriously the nationalist challenge. The post-independence Asian departures, as Vassanji presents them, had to do with the character of the colonial project, riddled as it was with overdetermined inequalities. This theme of the diaspora's betrayal by colonialism appears in several of the texts under scrutiny in this chapter. But what interests me here is how the precarious position of the diaspora is projected onto the African landscape and onto the "Africans."

When the unpopular action of nationalizing private property begins in *The Gunny Sack*, Salim and his family live in fear of their African employees, who are depicted as wanting to take over everything that the Shamsi and other Asian immigrants own. Special mention is made of Omari, the politicized and unionized employee of Salim's family, who demands backpay and

vacation pay for six years, all in the hope that Kulsum (Salim's mother) will hand over the tailoring shop to him. It is noteworthy that Omari is a friend to Idi, the driver, who is described by Salim's mother as "the one with the big head, the educated one with the newspaper" (171). As the certainties of the colonial period become unstuck, the diaspora's suspicions are directed more and more towards the nascent African educated classes. No wonder, Idi's education, the mark of African middle-class ambition, arouses such ire in Kulsum. Omari, the union-man, becomes a metonymy for post-colonial avarice, and the fear of socio-political change becomes embodied in his image. For instance, during the army mutiny of 1964, he appears in a dream to Salim, who imagines a *mob* rushing up the stairs, led by Omari the tailor, *eyes red with rage, seething* with *revenge*. "Now I will have the shop. The Fancy Store, now *all mine*!" His head kept getting bigger and bigger as he ascended, bent forward, arms swinging in front of him until at the head of the stairs there was nothing but the head, *big, black, puffed up*, eyes *red* and *gleaming*... it passed through me, this head, and behind it was Edward bin Hadith my friend, standing behind the crowd, apologetic, in his bush shirt.... All around me was the sound of the *black mob*, screaming, *yelling*, heckling, ascending the stairs in waves, coming at me and going through me... (179; emphasis added).

The image produced here in Salim's dream is one of an irrational passion on the part of the Africans. This perceived irrationality and its mindless megalomania is explained in terms of race, hence the stereotypes about Africans in the passage. What is intriguing in the passage is how the fear of class dispossession is displaced by exorbitant attention to the corporeality of the Africans. Such displacement plays an important ideological function in that, by racializing conflict, it homogenizes the diaspora as well as naturalizing social conflict, placing them beyond history.[28] The important position occupied by the language of race in the attempts of various political actors to stake a claim in post-colonial East Africa has been noted by many scholars, and is therefore no cause for surprise; what is remarkable is the finality with which ancestry fixes political meaning in the lives of the characters in *The Gunny Sack*. In spite of Salim's attempts to write a "melting pot" history of the region, the logic of racial difference remains, and hence Hassan Uncle's claim that wildebeest and zebra do not mate (185). Salim, who celebrates his multiple ancestries (an antithesis to Uncle Hassan's claim), at the same time expresses the deep-seated fear of Africa.

Having been incorporated into the unpopular para-military National Service by the Tanzanian government, Salim is sent to a camp next to the little town of Kaboya where he has a nightmare. He dreams of being chased by strange, menacing black men. Furthermore, the sentry who accords him a nasty welcome at the para-military camp is a "properly black" "man from the interior" with "wild-looking front teeth" and "bloodshot eyes." The first thing this wild man does upon meeting Salim is to "let out a shriek"

(*The Gunny Sack*, 202–203). To charge Vassanji's narrator with xenophobia, although the most obvious option, is unhelpful if the reader is to understand the extreme political impasse that Salim's fear means. More important than its paranoid underpinnings, Salim's portrait of the Tanzanian interior is a statement about the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of inventing a capacious post-colonial nation-state, capable of containing its multiple cultures and histories. It is instructive that the National Service that causes Salim much anxiety was also an important flagship project for the African post-colonial leadership in both Kenya and Tanzania.[29] Making the National Service a site for Salim's frustration with the new state is perhaps Vassanji's way of stating his own scepticism about Nyerere's socialist-Africanist project, one that refuses to carry, or is unwilling to function with, the excess meaning that the middle-class Asian presence presents in the face of the state's attempts at socialist political education. The dread that Salim expresses on his encounter with the African interior indicates his rejection of the "socialist" government which, unlike the colonial one, displaces the Asian and European settlers from their privileged status.

Vassanji's fiction shifts from the benign image of African passivity in the early colonial period to one of violent masculinity in the late colonial and post-independence period. This kind of shift can be seen also in white colonial fiction in which the image of the smiling Sambo figure of the early colonial period is replaced by the violent, machete-wielding, Mau Mau-esque figures of the late colonial period.[30] Vassanji recognizes that the figure of voiceless, passive Africans depends on an evasion by Asian characters of the tensions of the colonial situation. His narratives, to a degree, mimic the silencing of Africans in the early colonial period by excluding their voices from his narratives, but this is basically a parodic gesture that seeks to emphasize the diaspora's obliviousness to the real historical situation. When they finally awake to the realities of the situation, it is normally too late, and flight becomes an attractive option.

## The pulsating "African" universe of Nazareth and Tejani

If Vassanji is generally reticent about pointing out alternatives to the colonial racial impasse, Bahadur Tejani and Peter Nazareth take a more didactic approach to their subject matter and are quite direct in stating their distance from what they see as predominant Asian attitudes to Africa. This difference may have to do with the fact that, having already adopted Canada as his new home, Vassanji is less interested in thinking about the development of African-Indian concord in East Africa than he is in showing why those who left had to leave. Indeed, while the East Africa we encounter in Nazareth and Tejani consitutes the very moment of writing and is thus their primary preoccupation, the East Africa of Vassanji is quite different. East African scenes might occupy substantial portions of *The Gunny Sack* and *Uhuru Street*, for

instance, but they act primarily as a prelude to the Asian departure. Tejani's and Nazareth's novels, on the other hand, insistently reflect on ways in which the racial hierarchies of colonialism might be overturned. This has important consequences for the way they depict Africa. If Vassanji stops at parodying the closed character of Indian cultures, Tejani and Nazareth hoist up an image of African plenitude as an alternative to what they consider to be the austere lives of the diaspora.

Tejani's *Day After Tomorrow* is a meditation on the meaning of "freedom," which, in his view, "the Indians had never tasted" (137). Scared of their African surroundings, and weighed down upon by rigid traditions, the immigrants have denied themselves knowledge of their new environment, and by doing that imprisoned their full potential as humans. The opening chapters of the novel read very much like those in Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack*, which is similarly replete with images of the mysteriousness and strangeness of Africa and its people. That *Day After Tomorrow* provides a template for *The Gunny Sack*, whose publication it precedes by eighteen years, is beyond doubt. There are enough intertextual references to Tejani's novel in *The Gunny Sack* to suggest that it provided inspiration for Vassanji. For instance, while Tejani's protagonist is called Samsher, Vassanji names his Ismaili protagonists as the Shamsi. The classroom scenes in *Day After Tomorrow* (40–51) are also echoed in the short story, "English Lessons" in *Uhuru Street*. What marks out Tejani's novel, in spite of the fact that Vassanji has borrowed from it, is its intrepid quest for an alternative to the alienation of the East African Asian subject. It is not merely a search for better relations between Africans and Asians but also one for the primal human being that, in Tejani's view, has been suppressed by cultural habit and the pressures of modernity. What Tejani seeks is an Edenic moment that would also be the basis of a new society, free of prejudice and inhibition. Freedom, for Samsher, means the unrestrained exercise of the body's impulses, as opposed to the Wepari who see freedom in the denial of corporeal impulses and in the accumulation of property. As he breaks away from the restraints placed on his Indian compatriots by culture and tradition, Samsher develops a hatred for the regimentation of human impulses.

Samsher's romance with Nanziri is conducted against an African background teeming with the powerful presence of nature—majestic mountains, valleys, graceful animals, and so on—all of which suggest a sense of independence that modernity and rigid traditions have usurped. It is only the Africans who have not lost this earthiness, which is reflected in their robust corporeality. The narrative notes, for instance, that Samsher "had fallen in love with the African body, much stronger, handsomer and freer in its movements than any he knew of his own colour" (79). Evidently, there is much romanticism in these pages and also an amusing overcompensation for the prejudices of both the Wepari and the Europeans. Yet, in the romanticism there is also a strong vein of resistance to the cultural authoritarianism that

Tejani observed both in Indian traditions and colonial modernity. Stating that African culture had value in the mid 1960s, when Tejani first drafted the novel, would have seemed laughable to many East African Asians, who continued to believe, as Bharati demonstrates, that Africans could not make any meaningful contributions to universal human culture and who found the "praising [of] dark beauty . . . to be almost obscene."[31] In this sense, and given that it was the very first novel to be written by an East African Asian, Tejani's text was quite transgressive for its time. Yet one is left wondering whether, at that point in the evolution of African literature—more than five years after the initial Anglophone critiques of Negritude—Tejani could have genuinely believed in the particular images of Africa that his novel conveys. Tejani's Africa seems almost untouched by missionary education, and modern capitalism appears only as a jarring intrusion into the continent's timeless rhythms. Indeed, whereas he would want to convey the message that Africa can make a valuable contribution to human culture, that contribution, ironically, falls within the realm of nature. The African mode of being that Samsher desires is not a product of African agency, but a trait that has always been there—beyond history.

The highly sexualized images of Africa that we have seen in Vassanji also appear in the novels of Peter Nazareth, Tejani's contemporary and fellow Ugandan. However, unlike in Tejani, there is no hint of romanticism in Nazareth's description of scenes of African revelry, which serve mainly as naturalistic detail and as a dramatic background to the tensions that eventually lead to the expulsion of the *Wagoa* (Goans) and *Wahindi* (East Indians/Indians) from the fictional East African country named as Damibia. In both *In a Brown Mantle* and *The General Is Up*, the narrators consistently contrast African to Goan cultures. D'Souza, the narrator of *In a Brown Mantle*, depicts an African world full of eroticism, spontaneity and rhythm. This world, which seems to him to be sexually amoral, is set against a Goan universe that is orderly, restrained and austere. As a rebel, D'Souza desires the epicurean world of the Africans to make up for the restraints of his own community. As in Tejani's novel, African nightclub culture is a key marker of cultural difference, and thus an object of desire for the immigrant protagonist. In order to become part of this "pulsating universe" of the Africans, D'Souza seeks out black prostitutes and goes into the "underworld" of African nightlife in which the rules of decent Goan society are broken:

> I decided to take a break and go to the New Jazz Nightclub . . . . To a Goan, it was an *African* nightclub carrying with it overtones of the unusual, the underworld, possibly even a tinge of the depraved. It was thought that dances in African nightclubs broke the rules of normal society . . . . Go to an African nightclub and you are assailed by electronic wailing before you get in . . . . You pay a couple of shillings at the gate to a brightly painted

> woman, and enter into a sleazy hall . . . . The hall is dark and full of music. There is movement everywhere, people dancing and drinking. They are dressed as they like and do what they like. The atmosphere is charged as though the uninhibited human being is inescapably erotic. Or is it that one is attracted by seeing so many dark, unaccompanied women? . . . The guitars vibrate, the musicians sing a Congolese song in high-pitched voices, and you feel the throbbing in the pit of your stomach . . . . Your African partner is already in a world of her own, her face bearing an expression of not-knowingness. And the vibrations radiate from your stomach until your legs, your genitals, your chest, your brain—all are one mass of electronic rhythm. And the music swells and throbs. Time ceases to matter. All becomes a seething mass, like sperm in a release of semen.
>
> (*In a Brown Mantle*, 17–20)

Unlike Tejani, Nazareth does not identify in these scenes of the carnivalesque a refusal of the logic of modernity as such. His characters may seek the throbbing underworld of nightlife to escape the daily drudgery of modern existence, but the experience of pleasure only whets the appetites of the participants and is a prelude to political corruption, among other modern vices. One can indeed draw a causal link between the voracious consumption of leisure in the nightclubs to the greed that eventually mars the post-independence politics of Damibia. This does not mean, however, that Nazareth specifically targets any sense of African excess for disapproval; if anything, D'Souza's sharpest criticism is directed at the closed and rigid culture of the Goans and Indians. In *The General Is Up*, Nazareth remarks on the hypocrisy upon which the image of Goan and Indian rectitude depends:

> The Goans were very Victorian. Their girls were expected to be respectable and straightlaced and anti-sensual. The result was that the honest men had to hunt out Damibian women who did not have a Goan problem (the dishonest ones could find bored housewives, tired of their arranged, loveless marriages to older, respectable men or the more daring ones whose defiant love marriages had dried up too soon) (18).

For Nazareth, the attempt to construct Goan culture as the diametric opposite of African culture—which is then disparaged—not only has negative effects on the the Goans who are forced perpetually to mask their own desires, but also strains the relations between the two groups. Indeed, it is the patriarchal and heteronormative discourse of difference, shown in the passage above, that clashed with the equally masculinist logic of General Idi Amin's government, and resulted in the 1972 expulsion. Although Nazareth does not, like Tejani, assume that ethnic difference can be subsumed through an immersion in Negritude, he decries the colonial tendency to construct

difference as hierarchy. When difference is construed as representing having a moral content, this often degenerates into violence as the history of Uganda and Zanzibar shows.

East African Asian writing provides an important insight into the production of race and ethnicity. It suggests that the formula for differentiating the Asians and blacks in East Africa generally takes the form of a dyad through which simple ideological meanings are conveyed, although—as I have observed—Tejani attempts to turn this formula on its head. If on the one side there is a work-obsessed, self-denying, orderly a and repressed Indian society, on the other hand, there is a pleasure-loving, short-visioned, spontaneous, anarchic and wasteful African society. If we take into account Said's contention that "knowledge gives power, more power requires more knowledge, and so on in an increasingly profitable dialectic of information and control," then these representations of Africa become more crucial than is normally granted.[32] Africa is feminized at those instances when a rationale is needed for its exploitation. Figured as an empty womb or as a cultural vacuum, it is an object of desire for an India that is cast as virile, masculine and civilized. In another important ideological gesture, the sexuality of a feminized Africa is depicted as monstrous and fundamentally threatening to the potency of the invading Indian male. As a super-virile, over-masculinized entity that emerges alongside a neutered Indian male figure depicted as a "faggot" (or *hanisi*—the Kiswahili term for an effeminate man in *Uhuru Street*, 31), Africa sends diasporic Indian patriarchy into a sexual panic. To describe the African world as one of sensual excess, and to ascribe to the Indian diaspora a sense of modesty, is to provide a rationale for the social inequalities that exist, and the institutional arrangements that ensure their perpetuation in (post)colonial society.[33] In research that Bharati did in the 1960s, a number of his East African Asian respondents held the opinion that "Africans [...] are incurable spendthrifts, they do not know how to handle money and goods, and if they lose they don't care and they return to eating *posho* [maize meal] and bananas."[34] Here, as indeed it does in the literature, ethnicity and race become "the modality through which class is lived."[35]

# 5
# Gender, Sexuality and Community

## Introduction

In Chapter 4, I have considered how East African Asian writings depict the ways in which patriarchal interests among the Asian immigrants manipulate gender in attempts to mark the limits of identity. I have also examined what is at stake in such attempts to wrest control of the communal and personal imaginary. This chapter revisits that discussion, but deliberates more specifically on how the various interests within the diasporic groups in the writing are fostered, or even thwarted, by the language of gender. As I hope to have shown, the predominant language that diasporic Indian characters use to describe their contact with other cultural groups are drawn from the domain of gender. However, much as it may seem that the immigrants direct their anxieties about moral, divine and racial purity onto outsiders who are seen to threaten the community's sense of wholeness, these fears are also always pointed inwards, reaping as many casualties inside as they do on the outside. Because the Shamsi gender discourses in his fiction are generally attuned to elaborate image-building—the maintenance of honor—one of Vassanji's main tasks as a revisionist is to uncover the hypocrisy that is involved in such processes. Vassanji's fiction bears witness to the contradiction inherent in the imagining of community: the comforts of home are always haunted by the coercive moments of their consolidation. If the most visible action of the "cult of domesticity" is how it endeavours to keep the strange firmly on the outside, Vassanji's fiction provides a reminder of the coercion that is involved in such attempts to create a sense of home on the "inside."[1] If homes are to be understood as places of care and nurture, the corollary also has to be admitted: that they can also be places of violence and exclusion, where conformity is aimed even if it is not ultimately achieved.

As Seidenberg has noted, there has been a tendency among those writing on East African Asian history to accede to the pervasive myth that "the glue of shared experience" was more important than the inequalities and differences within Asian communities[2]—that unity within the diaspora was

ultimately more crucial than any schisms. It is therefore not entirely surprising that very few scholars have explored the class differences within the Indian diaspora in East Africa. The major casualties of the unitary image of the diaspora have been the women and poor members of the Indian communities, all of whose stories have been submerged by that of the largely male, middle-class merchant and professional classes. In response to such uni-dimensional renderings of the diaspora's history, Seidenberg has painted the caricature of "a poor Indian *male* in a remote area saving his pennies for the security of his family and for future generations."[3] Facetious as it may seem, this caricature is a telling critique of the way the diaspora's story has been told, especially the extent to which it has blocked from view much of what does not fit into its dominant frame. This chapter examines Vassanji's simultaneous presentation of gender as a necessary category in the invention of community and as a repressive performance that imperils personal and social desire. In presenting the ambivalent location of Asian women vis-à-vis community, Vassanji does not deny that they had vested interests in the construction of their communities, but merely emphasizes that such interests were not always served by the rhetoric of Asian identity. One of Vassanji's intentions is to disaggregate the notion of a well-bound community of Indians in East Africa, hence his attention to gender as a locus of difference and contradiction within the community. If Vassanji's ouevre, with the exception of *The Book of Secrets*, assumes a heterosexual Asian diasporic subject, the final section of this chapter is about the challenge posed to heteronormativity by queer diasporic sexualities. In rejecting the patriarchal logic of reproduction, Shailja Patel's *Migritude* and Ghalib Shiraz Dhalla's *Ode to Lata* show how alternative sexualities undermine the monological claims of diasporic cultural nationalism.

## Time, space, woman

The intense labor that has gone into the creation of the migrant cultures that East African Asian writers depict has been both constructive and destructive: constructive because it has involved summoning a culture into being, and negative because such acts of social engineering have ultimately been based on certain patterns of exclusion. Vassanji's fiction defines its task as one of subverting such acts of erasure, through elaborate attempts at historical reconstruction. In a deliberate gesture, Vassanji foregrounds women in an attempt to give greater prominence to what dominant historiographies have normally elided. The important roles played by the female characters in his fiction attests to this attempt to re-imagine the place of women in the diaspora's history: the centrality of Kulsum, Amina, Ji Bai and Bibi Taratibu in *The Gunny Sack*;[4] Khanoum and Mariamu in the *The Book of Secrets*; and Zera in *No New Land*, all attest to this concern.[5] Vassanji lays

bare the the practices that have fostered the relative invisibility of women in public history and, by writing women characters into prominence, posits a strong counter-narrative to such practices. This restitutive act is a direct challenge to notions such as respectability, purity, shame and honor, all which reinforce and legitimize the evacuation of women from public space and history. But I also advance the case that women's agency, as Vassanji presents it, exceeds the strictures of patriarchal culture, for the historicity of their participation in society cannot be completely written out by a stilted historiography. In presenting such an argument, I am drawing from the work of Eleni Coundouriotis, who argues for the recognition of the difference between historicity and historiography: "*historicity* is to be distinguished from the *historiographical*, and the historiographical (the writing and narrating of history) is the process bound up with conscious remembrance" (my emphasis).[6] As such, the absence, or the silences, of historiographical practice in regard to women does not change the intrinsic historical importance of their immersion in society. Nothing lends more credence to such a standpoint than the mere fact that the domestic scene, to which women characters are often confined, is an important site for the production of society, the historical diminution of that supposedly private space and of women's labor notwithstanding. But I also argue that the constraints put before women in Vassanji's fiction also quite often become the very facilities with which they leverage for power within their contexts. As a keen reading of his fiction aptly shows, "traditional" gender discourses, ordinarily seen as limiting to women's agency, are deployed by women in certain cases to actively pursue their interests. In such instances, it becomes apparent that the understanding of such discourses as purely patriarchal elides the complex processes through which gender power is negotiated, appropriated and deployed. In consequence, I use the term patriarchy as a provisional one that explains a great deal about gender relations, but which, like colonialism, identity, capitalism and so on, cannot fully explain the workings of society.

Elsewhere in this book, I have examined the selective ideological labor through which diasporic Asian ethnicities are constituted. If immigrant patriarchal ideology consistently interpellates men as harbingers of progress, Indian women occupy an anterior time in the discourse, for their role in the communities is mostly one of preserving a sense of continuity with a fictional Indian past, or with ensuring that the diaspora "recreate[s] a culture in diverse locations," to use Amitav Ghosh's phrase.[7] This partly dovetails with Seidenberg's history of immigrant Asian women in East Africa, in which she states that, "While their commerce-minded men focused on new wage-earning careers and politics in the economic and public spheres, women adhered to familiar cultural and moral certitudes of an archaic Indian past."[8] In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Indian-born migrant women in Vassanji's fiction almost always arrive as wives, uprooted from their homes at a young age to enter into arranged marriages. Men on the

other hand, always have a more unrestrained hand, even though they are not entirely free from the codes of family honor and respectability.

One of the more significant women characters in Vassanji's ouevre is Ji Bai of *The Gunny Sack*. Although she has become a well-respected figure by the time she passes on the contents of the heritage-rich gunny sack to Salim, the story of her migration from India is one that emphasizes the marginalization of women in her context. But her growth to prominence in her later years testifies to her exercise of a sense of agency that enables her to tell her own story. In contrast to the young males of Junapur, north-western India, who are enchanted by stories about East Africa, young Ji Bai cannot imagine life outside her village of Bajupur. "Like many girls of her age she had no plans of getting married, but imagined herself always in her father's village" (18). It seems that adventure is the preserve of males who are socialized to become adventurers and pioneers, to seek "other frontiers," and to attain the success associated with prominent businessmen like Amarsi Khan, Jairam Shivji and Ladha Damji, who have succeeded as pioneer merchants in the Sultanate of Zanzibar (9). Given this rather different relation of male and female to travel and adventure, it is indeed no small feat that Vassanji manages to make *The Gunny Sack* a narrative of travel—through both historical time and geographical space—that gives significant space to the telling of the story of women. Vassanji's appropriation of the travel genre in telling the story of women is an interesting variation on the overall theme of appropriation, for example, the ability of women to commit the discourse of patriarchy to their own interests. At the same time, this observation illustrates the central argument of this chapter: that any ideological system is vulnerable to the ability of social agents to use it in order to achieve a myriad of (sometimes conflicting) ends. Ji Bai represents the ability of women to initiate an irruption within what is assumed to be the dominant discourse of patriarchy.

At the young age of 13, news is sprung on Ji Bai that she is to be uprooted from Bajupur in India and married off to Gulam Govindji from East Africa. At no point is she consulted about the plans to marry her off. In one of the more comic parts of that chapter of the novel, she does not realize that the wedding ceremony that is being mounted is meant for her. As her father "gives her away," he tells her: "Don't let me down Ji Bai. Do nothing to bring shame upon yourself. Never walk out alone. Don't speak of your home outside the four walls. Always cover your family's shame. Don't come back without your husband's permission" (19). As a young woman, Ji Bai is charged with the responsibility of defending communal honor through ideal feminine domesticity. Through the not-so-subtle usage of powerful moral, religious and psychological categories such as guilt, shame and honor, she is carefully entwined in a web of relationships from which it is very difficult to break free. In spite of this intimate connection between her behaviour as a wife or daughter and the public image of her male relatives, she is herself

supposed to remain in the narrow confines of the home. Later in the novel when she gives birth to a son, the narrator speaks of it as something that promotes her father-in-law's standing in the society.[9] As Seidenberg states, if men could dabble in some expansive sense of "Asianness" within East Africa, women on the other hand were supposed to remain content with the possibilities that the immediate domestic scene offered them.

The larger bases of identity, as in "Asian" or "Indian," were categories in which women rarely participated, thus prompting Nalini Devi Pant—wife to Apa Bala Pant, independent India's first representative to the Kenyan colony—to remark that: "As women were conditioned to want to be Shahs, Lohanas, Patels, they felt at home with their own group and out of depth with others. At first they didn't want to get out of their own homes and groups and become an ASIAN community."[10] In a colonial East African context in which new, more expansive moral and political communities were quickly being fashioned, the restriction of women to the domestic sphere was meant to ensure that they would serve as a bridge between past and present, that they would become the tenuous link between a colonial, diasporic modernity and an Indian "antiquity," seen as essential in a treacherous age.[11] As Arjun Appardurai has observed in his discussion of diasporic cultures in late modernity, "the honor of women becomes increasingly a surrogate for the identity of embattled communities of males, while their women, in reality have to negotiate increasingly harsh conditions of work at home and in the non-domestic workplace."[12] If struggles over what constitutes Indianness, Shamsiness or Goanness in the literature are fought on female body-space, then it is logical to assume that a greater voice for women in such processes has the potential to shift the nature of the debate. Furthermore, the fact that women largely serve as metaphoric figures, or indicators of the moral standing of men, means that a scenario develops in which real/actual women are silenced, as Florence Stratton has argued in her discussion of African fiction.

In spite of the above-mentioned attempts to silence women within the diasporic communities, I argue that Ji Bai of *The Gunny Sack*, among many other women in Vassanji's fiction, represents the sustained resistance to the attempts to limit female agency. She grows up and marries into a context in which the predominant patriarchies construct women as the potential bearers of curses and dishonor. Yet it is within this constraining milieu that she manages to gradually gain respect as she gets older. In fact, if the contruction of community depends on the silencing of women, she subverts this by becoming an important community historian who opens "a small window into that dark past" for Salim, the narrator of the novel (135). What is useful about her role as sage-historian is that it opens up to scrutiny areas of the Govindji family history which are embarassing, stories which run counter to the patriarchy's attempts to present an exemplary image of itself. In an interesting twist, it is Ji Bai's intervention that leads to Salim's

discovery of Dhanji Govindji's relationship with Bibi Taratibu, the African slave-woman who is Salim's direct ancestor. Ji Bai is the one who lets Salim into the story of Dhanji Govindji's "deviant" adventures, his acquisition of an African slave-woman as a concubine, his theft of communal funds, and his eventual murder by those who detest him for the theft. If Shamsi society seeks to make women the repositories of the past but not the authoritative tellers of that past, Ji Bai is a historian. As such she becomes, not the object of male history, but one who organizes the way readers see the past in the novel. Arguably, her visibility within the text is due to the relatively early death of her husband, Gulam, which allows her greater control over her own life than would have been possible if he remained alive. If in her early years of marriage, she and other women of the Govindji household "daily propitiated" before Dhanji as if he "was like a god," in later years, she herself becomes a well-respected elder (20).

To understand why Vassanji figures gender as the site where some of the most spirited battles over morality are fought, it is crucial to pay particular attention to the fact that his narratives are set in periods of extreme historical turmoil, periods in which his diasporic subjects try to recover the "comforts of home," to use Luise White's phrase.[13] The harassment and disorientation many of the Asians face in Canada and in East Africa leads many of them to reconstitute community in the image of a lost, idyllic homeland. Since the domestic space is generally assigned a feminine character, there is concentrated pressure on women to the diaspora's regeneration. It is in the light of this that I read the embrace of religious mysticism by some of the women characters in Vassanji's fiction. Towards the end of *The Gunny Sack* and *No New Land*, many of the women join revivalist and moral rearmament movements. Fatu Auntie in *The Gunny Sack* becomes an ardent follower of Nasir Bunzai, a Sufi mystic from Pakistan, at a time when there are political upheavals in post-independence Tanganyika (255). In Toronto, Zera of *No New Land* invites the appropriately named "Missionary," the religious leader from Dar, to come and preside over the community's moral reinvention.

Zera is much more than a mere embodiment of Anne McLintock's thesis that patriarchal nationalisms constitute women as the atavistic repositories of tradition.[14] The narrative voice says of Zera that "She did not like change" (6). She is an agent for the securing of the communal heritage, even though the structures she stridently defends rarely function to the advantage of women in general. Indeed, she is the stereotypical Indian mother who dotes on her son and cares little about her daughter, Fatima: "Over him [Fatima's brother, Hanif] Zera made the greater claim. Their daughter they had perhaps lost already, but she would never lose Hanif. No, not him" (6). In addition to her protectiveness of the male lineage, she also sets as one of her prominent tasks the defence of Islamic mores against the onslaught of Western cultural globalism. At one level, Zera appears as a bearer of a

patriarchal, communitarian ideology that subjugates women. Yet, the sense of community provides the support that enables her to stand her ground as she simultaneously tries to become an agent in her own right. However, it is in this very committment to irony that her whole strategy of resistance is rendered problematic. In privileging a certain communitarian ideal as the most suitable in trying to defend her personhood, it would seem as if her very concrete particularity has been consumed by this ideal. All sense of herself as body seems to have been subsumed by a hegemonic spiritual ethos that demands she sublimates her desires at the service of what seems to be a patriarchal principle: God, community, Missionary and Haji Lalani. She refers all questions about modesty and tradition to Missionary. She is most vociferous in condemning the scantily dressed Canadian females, "shameless bitches" in her words (55). The apparent chaos in her personality as a woman would indeed be incomprehensible if the reader tries to understand through a rigid, ideological grid. Her ambivalent status as both assertive woman and one committed to communal ethos, rather than render her a coopted apologist for female oppression, is what makes her fascinating. It is this very sense of contradiction that confirms her status as a fully living and concrete subject. Placed at the confluence of several intersecting demands, she embodies the multifariousness of such demands. If she stands in contradiction to the ideal images of female agency within discourses oppositional to patriarchy, her puzzling attribute can be read as symptomatic of her material position in a diasporic world.

Zera is in fact the most spirited of all the major characters in *No New Land*. Whereas Nurdin is inwardly tortured at his loss of social status following the immigration to Canada, and Nanji burdened by existential angst, Zera remains a resolute character who embodies the diaspora's determination to survive displacement. If in the East African context, Shamsi women are largely confined to domestic chores, in the Canadian context, they seem to have a greater sense of social and economic mobility. The narrative gestures at the emasculation of the men who now have to accede to the pride of the female breadwinners. Yet the more power she attains in her household, the more Zera embraces the Shamsi patriarchal order and the religion that sanctions it. In a superb stunt of skilful abrogation, she makes the language of patriarchy resonate with her own interests. By identifying herself with the law of the fathers, she attains a crucial edge over Nurdin, who still lives in mortal terror of his late father, the puritanical Haji Lalani. When she hoists Haji Lalani to the status of an idol in her household—she hangs his portrait on the wall of the Toronto apartment—she reminds Nurdin of his childhood when he lived under the tyranny of the father. As a result, she manages to control, even if unwittingly, Nurdin's desire to have an affair with Sushila and his attempts to adopt the sexual permissiveness of Canadian society. By lurching onto patriarchy, Zera manages to keep her family together. This ability on her part to bend male institutions to her will testifies to the trap

that cultural critics fall into when they render deterministic readings of cultural institutions.

Western writings on the Islamic cultures of the world have tended to focus inordinately on the question of women,[15] how they are denigrated by *purdah*, how they are kept in harems, how they are hidden beneath the veil, on the practice of female genital mutilation, and on the mysterious seductiveness of this world. Apart from the desire to bring Islam within the ambit of Western discipline, these discourses about women in the Islamic world have colluded with the Islamic traditions they disparage for silencing Muslim women. By evacuating women from a public role within Islam in general, these discourses about the Islamic world have often presented the West in a chivalrous light, as intent on rescuing the Islamic woman from a phallocratic and theocratic "tradition."[16] As Nawal El Saadawi notes, such discourses have invariably associated Westernization with gender liberation and the Islamic tradition with gender oppression.[17] These discourses have been based on the assumption that the agency of Muslim women is totally subsumed by patriarchy, that the banishment of women from public roles is complete, that masculinist Islam produces nothing in excess of its expressed intentions. Yet a reading of Vassanji's fiction suggests otherwise, for it is one that repudiates the monolithic image of Islamic women as victims.

The Shamsi women in *The Gunny Sack* do have parallel public spaces in which they enact roles and assume characters with which Islamic women are not ordinarily associated. If in the broader public forums in which every member of the community is involved the women generally assume pious postures, in other circumstances, they adopt different personas. This ability to shift roles testifies to the argument that gender is a performative category whose character takes on the shape and color of the moment.[18] For instance, in a study conducted in Kampala, Uganda, Christine Obbo found out that although Muslim Nubian women performed a charade of piety and respectability for the benefit of their husbands and families, they nonetheless were very much like the non-Muslim women who, however, seemed more licentious in their public roles.[19] Similarly, Shamsi women in *The Gunny Sack* oscillate between lewdness and decency, between an earthy coarseness and the high culture of the "European" cities of East Africa (72). Salim's Aunt Gula is not the demure, stereotypical Muslim woman, but a ribald one who boasts to other women about the sexual prowess of her husband: "Come and play with his tanpura one night and hear his sweet music" (72). However, Vassanji is also interested in showing the limits to the kind of license that Aunt Gula represents. Not very long after boasting about the "musical prowess" of her husband, she douses herself in kerosene for he has been having several affairs (75). Recognizing this kind of tension between a sense of freedom and the attendant vulnerability of women enables a more informed reading of gender in Vassanji's fiction.

## Widowhood, matrifocality, community

Vassanji has observed that in the Asian communities of East Africa, men often died much earlier than women. As such, women were compelled to develop strong personalities so that they could successfully fend for themselves and their families.[20] No wonder then that there are several widowed women who occupy critical roles in his fiction; in fact, they predominate in *The Gunny Sack*, and to an extent in *The Book of Secrets*. Most of the stories in *Uhuru Street* also depict households headed by widowed women. Widowhood presents several difficulties for the women, for the society that Vassanji depicts is one that defines women in relation to marriage; in fact, the marital institution is the index of the status of women among the Shamsi. As Seidenberg observes, if on the one hand widowhood among East African Asians was regarded negatively because of the belief that no "woman could have an interesting life without being married," on the other hand, any attempts by widows to remarry were often opposed, either by those who saw remarriage as a sign of disloyalty to the departed husband, or by those who saw widows as "already used" and "rejected."[21] Faced with this kind of double jeopardy, Kulsum of *The Gunny Sack*, one of Vassanji's most memorable women characters, has to make a difficult choice: to remarry and lose her standing among the Shamsi, or not to remarry and thus live without the benefits that come with a husband in a patriarchal society. She chooses not to remarry, although there are several men who are interested in her. Born of a father who thinks unmarried daughters are a curse, she is given away at the tender age of sixteen to a man about whom her family has reservations because "he is so dark" (62). The death of her husband, Juma, not many years after the arranged marriage comes as a major setback. After the death of Juma, she decides that she will do her utmost to preserve the memory of him. As Salim says: "[s]he accepted no offers, memory was her husband. But she knew how fragile was the reputation of a widow, and she never went to town without either Sona or me with her" (167).

The story of Kulsum, as told by her son Salim, is about women's ability to improvise strategies of accessing power under the most difficult of situations. Portrayed as a hypochondriac, Kulsum is the stereotypical image of woman as a victim of circumstances (59). Yet Salim's portrayal of her celebrates her ingenuity which allows her to make the best of what is indeed a difficult situation. In wonderment at his mother's character, Salim writes:

> The first guerilla was surely a woman. The ways of a woman are softer but surer. The timing is precise and the target just right. When she strikes, with a force not overly strong, the whole machinery threatens to come to a riotous stop. Scandal and public embarassment looms not far ahead, while panic takes over. (70)

Vassanji's point seems to be that although the relationship of women to men may seem to be one of subservience and acquiesence, the picture is more complicated, for there exists within the cultural repertoire available to women, opportunities for contesting power and for outwitting men. As Christine Obbo has observed, "[i]n manipulative societies, women see that their position is inferior to that of men and resort to deceit, withdrawal, cunning and circumvention to obtain their desires and goals . . . Where power and authority are in the hands of men, women work to influence the men."[22] Likewise, Shamsi women resort to manipulative and subversive techniques, and generally avoid frontal conflicts, in their competition for power with the men in their community. It is this approach to gender politics that Kulsum embodies.

Immediately after she is wedded in Mombasa to Juma, a relatively poor man with an unimpressive pedigree, the two of them relocate to colonial Nairobi so that he can continue working for one Hassam Pirbhai. Because of their poverty, they are absorbed into the Pirbhai household in which they become second-class kin. Although they are readily accepted as an extension of the family, a heavy price is exacted on them in return, and Kulsum, being a woman, pays the greater price.

> Over the six young women the tall, thin-lipped, long-nosed puritan Awal [Pirbhai's wife] ruled with an iron hand. '*If your pachedi* [veil] *keeps slipping off your heads, use a nail*,' she would rail, in her constant efforts to *preserve her home's khandaanity*: that snobbish form of *respectability* which every family, however crooked, lays claim to. Daughters-in-law, responsible for the *khandaanity* of their father's names, occupied the lowest rungs in the family hierarchy. Kulsum was the wife of the orphan, the half-caste, and herself of humble origin: there was no one lowlier than her at the home of Hassam Pirbhai.
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> (68; my emphasis)[23]

It is in the attempt to escape from the claustrating atmosphere of the Pirbhai home, in which doubts are raised even about her fertility, that Kulsum's subdued creativity breaks out onto the surface, but subtly. She hatches the plan that makes Salim go lyrical about the woman as a trickster, as the first guerilla.

The scene described above provokes several questions about Salim's narration of women's lives throughout *The Gunny Sack*. Does he celebrate the resilience, the agency, of the women to an extent that he downplays their objective problems? Does Salim, like the Negritude poets, hoist women onto a pedestal when the fact is that women are denied formal power in the community he depicts? Is he over-stretching the bounds of irony when he depicts Kulsum gladly using so-called "feminine wiles" to get Juma to do what she wants? Is he endorsing what Naomi Wolf calls "the beauty myth"

which celebrates "feminine wiles" as women's primary source of currency?[24] Whereas Kulsum choices are reduced by the dominance of men in her context, it is also important to look at her as a being-in-history, acting on the opportunities that are immediately available to her, and not deferring action until she is assured of the theoretical and ideological purity of her actions. As a being-in-history—one who acts within the opportunities and constraints of her context—she may not reflect a pure and self-conscious ideological position. Nonetheless, she still embodies a determination to live a fulfilled life and this is what ultimately makes her intriguing. In this respect, she seems a lot like Nyapol in Grace Ogot's *The Promised Land* (1966) whose major strategies for gaining influence, as Florence Stratton notes, is a demure show of loyalty to men that masks her real interests and intentions.[25] Like Ogot, Vassanji's approach to the gender question is untidy, refusing at every juncture to present a neat summary of the problem.

After her husband's death later in the novel, Kulsum chooses not to engage in a relationship with any other man. Unfree as this choice may be, it testifies to the way in which women may feign subservience precisely so that they may access power. She ignores the thinly veiled romantic affections of Edward bin Hadith, one of her suitors, for this would imply that she has chosen to denigrate the position the dead husband still occupies in her household. When young Salim eats the apples that have been set aside as an offering to the spirit of Juma, Kulsum severely beats him up and reprimands him for the transgression. But why does Kulsum venerate a dead husband in this manner? By acceding to communal expectation that she ought not to remarry, she manages to reserve a place for herself within the community. The fact that her choices are constrained by patriarchy does not completely whittle away her ability to act decisively in her own interest and in the interest of her family. Many times in Vassanji's fiction, widowed women use their "loyalty" to dead husbands, and the fact of widowhood itself, to gain leverage within the society. Because of her apparent toeing of the patriarchal line, Kulsum is able to seek help from prominent male members of the Indian community; on several occasions, she appeals to their sense of "civic responsibility" in order that she gets her way (199).

In the short story "Leaving" in *Uhuru Street*, we encounter another widow—simply named Mother—who in almost every sense is a reflection of Kulsum.[26] When her son, Aloo, is granted a place in an American university, she seeks the advice of a prominent member of the Indian community, Mr Velji, who is a former school administrator. One of the many things these two women have in common is how hard they labor in order to see their children through school. At the same time, one also notes how, with time, their sons cease to see them merely as mothers but as persons. Salim simply calls his mother "Kulsum," not as a sign of disrespect, but as a way of recognizing that she cannot be defined merely in relation to her family. Likewise, the narrator of the story "Leaving" comes to an appreciation of

his mother as a personality apart from the motherhood role that she plays. After the narrator's brother, Aloo, announces his decision to leave home to go to America, Mother goes into deep thought about it: "It was, I think, the first time I saw her as a person and not only as our mother . . . She had been thirty-three when Father died, and she had refused several offers of marriage because they would all have entailed one thing: sending us all to the boarding school—'the orphanage' " (77). It is ironic here that the narrator comes to a recognition of his mother's individuality in spite of her self-sacrifice—her self-effacement through a consistent dedication to her children—and not because she self-consciously asserts her personhood. Likewise, Salim's strange, albeit reverential, reference to his mother as "Kulsum" is done in spite of her extreme dedication to her children and the memory of a dead husband.

Despite their outward demeanour of submissiveness, Vassanji's widows display several ingenious means of accessing power without appearing to be doing so. In fact, the aura of submissiveness that they exude is really a ruse for maintaining autonomy in a context in which the image of docility on the part of women is considered desirable. When widowed women seemingly accede to the wishes of the community by declining offers to remarry, they have in fact found a fairly convenient way for attaining a sense of control and independence that is otherwise detested in women.

## Recovering women's secret presence: Mariamu, Khanoum and Bibi Taratibu

Vassanji's fiction dramatizes the suppression of women's voices in historiography and memory, and at the same time attempts a recovery of those lost voices, leading Neloufer De Mel to remark that the giving of prominence to female characters in Vassanji's fiction is indicative of a desire to "[center] marginal voices."[27] Vassanji's recovery of subjugated voices is especially notable in his presentation of three key women characters: Mariamu and Khanoum in the novel *The Book of Secrets*, and Bibi Taratibu of *The Gunny Sack*. What these three women have in common is that, in their relationships with men, they fall short of the requirement of "respectability," as a result of which they disturb the Shamsi family romance. This results in their banishment from communal memory. While Khanoum and Taratibu are both black African women, and therefore considered alien to the Asian communities into which they are married, the controversy around Mariamu results from her wilful and rebellious nature, especially in relation to sexuality. In addition, Mariamu appears to have been the victim of her step-father's sexual abuse and to have conceived an "illegitimate" child with the British administrator, Alfred Corbin, who is a key focal point in the novel. Mariamu and Taratibu are both ghostly figures, almost written out of history, and only survive in the form of memories that come back to haunt the families they have

left behind, and also the narrators of the novels. The lives of these women are clouded in secrets: pasts whose revelation forces the Shamsi community to injustices committed in the quest for respectability. In addition, the telling of the stories of women is an integral part in the subversion of those narratives that have disregarded the role of women's labor in the production of East African Asian communities.

In the depiction of Mariamu in *The Book of Secrets*, Vassanji sharpens the focus on his pet theme of memory and historical knowledge, and considers how "traditional" cultural practices render women ghostly presences in history. Caught in a web of relationships that involves Corbin, Rashid (her adopted father) and Pipa (her husband), Mariamu is depicted as an enigma that defeats attempts to gain true knowledge of her person. Although her relationship with Pipa is sanctioned by the community for it is the product of a legal, Muslim marriage, her association with the other two men is clouded in mystery for the reason that such association is potentially scandalous. When young Corbin arrives for the first time in the small Kenyan trading settlement of Kikono, one of the first people he sees is Mariamu, who appears to him as an "apparition" (29). Corbin juxtaposes her elusiveness with what he regards to be "the inscrutability of the alien—how there must be matters of which one will never have an inkling" (48). If, at this stage, the Shamsi are too inscrutable for the European colonial administrator, Corbin, to understand, the woman for him embodies this impossibility of knowledge. Being a proponent of indirect rule—which required the recognition of the existing "native" society—and also a cosmopolitan of sorts, Corbin is anxious for cross-cultural communication. Yet his desire for communication with the people of Kikono is not devoid of a certain instrumentalist logic: for him, the cultures of the colonized should, as much as possible, be marshalled to the service of the British Empire. As such, the inscrutability of Kikono people, which Mariamu embodies, is merely an obstruction to his ethnographic curiosity and his desire to be a knowledgeable agent of empire. However, it is not only Corbin who develops a curiosity about Mariamu. When she is in the employ of Corbin, Rashid constantly snoops around Corbin's house to find out what the two of them are up to. Long after she is killed, her husband, Pipa, tries to piece together her history by unravelling her secrets. He even builds a shrine to assuage her spirit, which constantly haunts his imagination.

But, what is it that makes Mariamu a ghostly figure? The lives of the Shamsi women Vassanji depicts are governed by prohibitions. The unconventional Mariamu lives in breach of such prohibitions, the end result of which is that she becomes an unpronounceable name that induces shame in the community. As such, she vanishes from the public history in the same way that she "[disappears] behind an incline" when she encounters Corbin for the first time (28). In fact, the motif of the mysterious, ghostly woman is one that appears in both *The Book of Secrets* and *The Gunny Sack*. This motif

of female evanescence is one that Vassanji employs to underscore the physical and discursive evacuation of women from the civic arena. Although the men interact with women physically and verbally, such interaction is consistently made shameful to the extent that women remain as secrets. One of the major secrets in *The Book of Secrets* is whether Rashid—Mariamu's foster father—has indeed subjected her to sexual abuse. The other is whether Alfred Corbin has had sexual relations with Mariamu in the period in which she is in his employ. These questions are important in the context of the narrative because part of the shame that surrounds Mariamu derives from the fact that she may not have been a virgin at the time she married Pipa, and that Pipa is not certain that he is the biological father to her son, Ali Akber (Aku). Despite the insistent ideological labor that goes into the silencing and veiling of women's lives, Mariamu seems aware of the hypocrisy involved in the process. She recognizes the disjunction between the myth of family respectability and the fact her one major source of personal danger is within her own family: her step-father Rashid. Her experience of Rashid's abuse creates a permanent schism in her mind between the image that community creates of itself and the secrets that are masked in that very process of social engineering. When, in a bout of exhibitionism, she dances suggestively before Alfred Corbin, she is involved in a subsversive act for she is letting a foreigner, and a man at that, into the communal secret (43). She is dramatizing the rupture of the fiction of respectability upon which her society depends; she is baring to a stranger the duplicitous nature of the community—although, she is also unwittingly allowing Corbin a foothold in the lives of the Shamsis. When the community condemns her as a lunatic, deserving of the cruel attempts at exorcism Corbin describes (68–69), it is merely projecting its own doubleness onto a "daughter of the community" who recognizes that split character (70). Mariamu, so the elders claim, is inhabited by *shetani*, a ghost that has to be driven away. She is thus subjected to sustained physical assualt. But what exactly is the *shetani*? Could it be that part of human desire that the community suppresses for the sake of social amity? In this particular case, it may be the agency of woman that threatens to render corrode male-constructed notions of community. It could be Mariamu's "strange ways": her lewd dancing before Corbin, her indecent public postures, and the fact that she becomes a "tigress" when possessed (70–71). All of these pose a challenge to the notion of the "good woman," which serves to limit women's exercise of choice. The labeling of the desires of Shamsi women as "satanic" has its corollary in the rendering of African women as absences, an act of textual erasure that Vassanji attempts to reverse.

"A few years ago practically every [white] man in Nairobi kept a native girl—or two or three. Now they are more civilized and busy with each other's wives," so remarks Frank Maynard in *The Book of Secrets* (19). This theme about how settler-societies conveniently forget how they are originally

constituted, how they consign colonized women to absence, is one that appears several times in East African Asian literature. The character Keval in Jagjit Singh's play "Sweet Scum of Freedom" says: "Used to be different when we first came to Africa, of course. When we were poor and alone and struggling and without women. Then we slept with native African women and had lots of chotara [half-caste] children. But now we have too much religion and too many women of our own" (46). In the settler narrative described in the above passages, the facts of the original contact with Africa, marked with a good degree of mutuality and interaction—and a certain measure of coercion as well—are soon rendered shameful and then forgotten. The marking and subsequent sequestering of the racial groups is driven into high gear precisely at a time when the competition for social wealth has intensified. These examples suggest that although the initial contact was characterized by ambiguities, once racial idealism set in during high colonialism, previously malleable social categories solidified into rigid types. This reification of identity, which was often endorsed by the diaspora's mainstream politics, was not for its own sake, though. Defining as it did the medial place which the diaspora would occupy, the colonial system helped in calcifying the meanings of Indianness. For the diaspora, the threat—posed by miscegenation—to the special designation "Indian" within the colonial context was not an idle one. Not only did it present a danger to the pre-existing social and economic networks based on religion, caste and filial relationships, it would also have meant an end to the meagre, but nonetheless critical, privileges those designated as "Indian" had within the colonial economy. As such, the purging of African women in idealist conceptions of Indianness is not mere prejudice; rather, it is the product of a specific history in which particular ways of identification had a certain currency.

When in *The Gunny Sack* the people of Junapur (a village in northwestern India) go into uproar about their sons in East Africa marrying black slave-women, they are not merely expressing an impulsive horror and disgust at strangers. They are concerned about the dangers miscegenation poses to ideas about Indianness. That is why after Fatima marries Dhanji Govindji, she immediately sets on a course of removing Taratibu from the vicinity of her residence in Matamu. Later, she works hard to ensure that Taratibu's son, Huseni, also leaves Matamu. She asks Ji Bai, her daughter-in-law: "Tell me, what is my sin, that I should inherit this slave's son with my marriage . . . this junglee who stands out like a wart in this family, a bad influence on my children, ruining their good name" (28).[28] Fatima's question captures, in essence, the complicated ways in which considerations of class, gender and race converge as the now-established Shamsi community in Tanganyika tries to define the limits of a new civil society.[29] Coming as she does from a slave-owning Zanzibari family, Fatima is doubly contemptuous of her husband's link to a slave-woman, for this represents the crossing of social boundaries which she has been raised to detest. At the same time, she conceives the

socio-economic gulf between herself and the slave-woman, Taratibu, as representing a "moral" distance. To abrogate Frantz Fanon's famous phrasing of the tautology underlying such an attitude, 'You are rich because you are morally upright, and you are morally upright because you are rich.'[30]

Within the circular and fatalistic logic of this formulation, there is no respite for Huseni from Fatima's accusation that he represents moral degeneracy that threatens the respectability of the Shamsi family. Whenever Fatima says that "Arab blood runs through my veins, I have Shirazi ancestors," she might as well be making the statement that her moral credentials are excellent (28). Yet, she seems to overlook the fact that her own marriage to Govindji is not "proper," hence the community's chastising of her husband, Dhanji Govindji: "How can a young man simply marry a girl from a family he doesn't know, without a formal proposal and the negotiation of mohor, without his family's permission?" (12).

It is important to note that in the context of colonial East Africa, it was easier for the Indian communities to tolerate marriage to Arabs and Europeans than to Africans. For the reason that wealth was so insistently tied to morality within colonial societies, connubial ties between the Indians and the relatively wealthy Arabs or Europeans never excited as much rancour as similar relations with Africans.[31] Poverty represented moral degeneracy; intimate ties with the poor were seen as posing the threat of contamination. For the reason that Africans had not only been calcified in the colonial imaginary as the natural exemplars of penury, but were also actively impoverished through colonial laws, the Indian diaspora and the European settlers viewed children resulting from unions with Africans as something that would progressively erode the moral and economic standing of their respective communities while also imploding the myths of race and caste. As the narrator of the novel, states: "A whiff of African blood from the family tree would be like an Arctic blast, it would bring the mercury of social standing racing down to unacceptable levels" (150). Thus, in Fatima's mind, Huseni's blood link to her husband does not count for much; in fact, she traces his genealogy solely to the "slave" and to the "jungle"—she calls him a "junglee." There are instances of vulnerability when members of the diaspora see African people as having the power to pollute others while remaining themselves impervious to any negative influences from those others. Note, for example, that Fatima does not imagine the possibility of her own children corrupting Huseni. As such, the masculine triumphalism that attends the diaspora's exploration of the African interior—a pioneering activity that is given symbolic embodiment in "half-caste" children like Huseni—is neutralized by the imagined diabolical capacity of black Africans to contaminate Indian society.

Bibi Taratibu's removal from the Govindji household has to do not merely with the desire of the Shamsi to remain ritually pure, but also with the ideological conflation of genealogy, identity and purity with wealth and

power. In a memorable exchange riposte to Kenyan nationalist leader, Tom Mboya, who expressed concern that Kenyan Indians were not marrying Africans, Jawaharlal Nehru—India's first Prime Minister—quipped that even in India itself, "we do not even marry each other, why should we marry non-Indians?"[32] This constant refrain about *dharma* as the cause of the diaspora's alienation from East Africa might sometimes seem overdone because the history of its origins in India was certainly contaminated by the historical experiences of the diaspora in colonial East Africa, hence partially invalidating the plea that India is the absolute reference point for the diaspora's cultures. Religion, surely, needs to be historicized just like any other category. My intention is not to suggest that the social seclusion of the diaspora, and their anxieties about miscegenation, was a mere cover for the economic machine; what is difficult to believe is that the diaspora could have adhered to the discourse of "purity," injurious to themselves as it proved to be, if it did not also come with certain concrete benefits within the world of colonialism. I am more persuaded by curator Sultan Somjee's stance that the much-vaunted "clannishness" of East African Asians was a recipe for the creation of a vibrant civil society which survives to date.[33] Nonetheless, such recognition does not override the argument that the creation of "civil society" in this manner did, and still continues to, have casualties. If Bibi Taratibu is only the first of these casualties within *The Gunny Sack*, the troubles that the diaspora experience with the coming of independence can be read as the latest legacy of exclusivist constructions of Shamsi "community" within colonial society.

## The legibility of queer in Shailja Patel's *Migritude* and Ghalib Shiraz Dhalla's *Ode to Lata*

In "Dreaming in Gujarati," a piece that forms part of her collection of performance poems, *Migritude* (2010), the Kenyan-Indian-American writer Shailja Patel tells of her troubled relation with English and Gujarati, her "Mother tongue" (51).The tussle with the two languages coincides with her autobiographical quest for an alternative gender and sexual identity against the beliefs of her mother. While English represents the violence of the British Empire and the post-Cold War American world-order, it is simultaneously a means through which she has accessed "Words that don't exist in Gujarati: *Self-expression/Individual/Lesbian*" (51). Since Gujarati marks the primal scene of her childhood in Kenya, in which attempts have been made to discipline her into an ideal ethnic and gendered subject, she associates the language with "fictions of purity that lie at the heart of dominant nationalist and diasporic ideologies" (Gopinath, 4). Her initial interpretation of the language as a bearer of the patriarchal, nationalist logic of reproduction is reflected in the Gujarati-speaking children who appear in her dreams, imploring her to take on a mothering role, an image that echoes her own

childhood dependence on Gujarati-speaking figures of domestic authority. Conversely, she also believes that English allows her to claim an ambiguous gender identity, symbolized by the androgynous image of a shaved head and combat boots, as opposed to the Gujarati-speaking "grannies in their white saris" (51). However, if English provides a set of ready-made concepts that name same-sex desire, her exclusive adoption of it as a tool for queer self-fashioning ultimately appears to her as an abdication. Her earlier flight from Gujarati, she comes to realize, is partly the product of colonially induced language shame. As a writer whose forceful polemic in the book is directed at patriarchy, heteronormativity, colonialism and capitalist globalization, she comes to see her childhood unease with Gujarati as a betrayal of her political beliefs as an adult. Although English has provided her with a vocabulary for responding to racism in the UK (where she moved in her late teenage years) and the US (where she has lived since the mid-1990s), she recognizes that Gujarati and other languages spoken in East Africa gesture at senses of community alternative to those forged by transnational capitalism, whose most privileged language is English. She therefore reclaims Gujarati in a gesture that seems at first to be a return to lost origins, an act of reconciliation with her own mother, the figurative Mother India, and the oppressed in the Global South. Having cast liberalist self-identity and queer as concepts unavailable in Gujarati, her symbolic return to the natal scene represented by the language appears to her as yet another betrayal, a process through which her queer senses of selfhood may once again be made invisible. Patel's doubt about her homecoming is captured in the solipsistic question she poses about the presence of a Gujarati queer identity: "If we cannot name it, does it exist?" (53). Patel approaches queer selfhood not simply as an immanent category, an idea already translated into material form through human bodies and sexual practice, but also as a problem of language and, thus, reading. Patel's question, as to whether a queer sense of selfhood is possible in a culture that refuses to name homosexuality, provokes a range of other related questions. What is gained or lost in naming and translating homosexuality? What is the ideological effect of using English to name and read sexual practices in cultures that are hesitant to name the same practices? What is the price paid in returning to a language like Gujarati, the sign of a "mother" culture which appears to be marked by an inflexible tradition? Finally, what are the hidden presumptions at the heart of practices of naming and taxonomy with regard to sexuality?

*Migritude*, in its reflection on the limits and possibilities of using language to make materiality and experience publicly visible, presents a useful starting point for the discussion of queer diaspora culture in this section. In spite of its vigorous critique of European colonial empires and globalization, *Migritude* shows the extent to which anti-imperial queer politics in the Global South and its diasporas derives its vocabulary from the dominant canons and institutions that produce Euro-American sexual identities. As a

text whose aim is to critically reconstruct the troubled history of migrants and commodities of the Global South in the world of colonialism and globalization, *Migritude* could be said, in Gayatri Gopinath's terms, to be "produced in and through the workings transnational capitalism" (Gopinath, 12). As a work allied to an emergent politics of counter-globalization, it assumes responsibility for a global community of insurgent migrants while mapping local histories in order to strip bare the ambitious claims of dominant, capitalist globalization. The flows of commodities, people and cultures that the book maps, and the linguistic forms through which it seeks to do the mapping, owe partly to empire but "also provide the means by which to critique the logic of global capital itself" (Gopinath, 12). This antagonistic indebtedness of post-colonial queer to empire and global capital is pivotal to my reading of gender and sexuality in *Migritude* and Ghalib Shiraz Dhalla's novel *Ode to Lata*.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault traces the discursive processes through which notions of "sexuality" and sexual "identity" have been produced in the history of Western culture. In his archaeology, Foucault outlines two major ways in which sexuality has been apprehended in that history. Unlike in the four centuries leading up to the twentieth century, sex acts in the Roman Empire were generally regarded as pleasurable and not stigmatized as sources of shame. Sex as an act was kept secret and not classified because doing otherwise would detract from its pleasures. Foucault contrasts this attitude, which also existed in many places in the ancient world, with that which develops in Europe in the modern period. He alludes to the death of sexual pleasure by exhibition and analysis, a characteristic feature of the development of *scientia sexualis*—the science of sexuality. In the quest for transparent knowledge of sex acts, the science of sexuality resorts to an established Christian maneuver, that of wringing out the truth through confession. It can be deduced from Foucault's account that the modern ritual of confessing homosexuality, the act of "coming out" is an outgrowth of the scientific impulse towards truth and taxonomy. By coming out of the closet, people sexually involved with members of the same sex acquire sexual "identities," for it is in doing so that they become readable and classifiable, as opposed to occupying zones of occult elusiveness. Erotic acts between people of the same sex transmutes in this process of historical change from mere acts (something people do) to an identity (what people are). In Foucault's words, "The sodomite had been a temporary aberration, the homosexual was now a species."[34]

My revisiting the concern of Western science with making sexuality visible and readable is because *Migritude* and *Ode to Lata* are situated in a complex historical axis that links the Indian diaspora with classical colonial capitalism, cultures of African and Indian Ocean worlds and, finally, Euro-American sites in the age of late capitalism. The two texts invite contrapuntal readings, which subject gay and lesbian "identities" to scrutiny from a range of

epistemic perspectives. What, according to these texts, are the machineries or discursive formations that facilitate queer identities in sites in the Global North and South? What acts of translation are feasible between these different scenes in regard to sex acts and ideas of selfhood? What are the perils of displacing transnational capital and Euro-American constructions of "sexuality" through their preferred language, English? How, if at all, do the two texts examine the ideological ruses through which the languages of colonial power have been cast as democratic and dynamic in regard to sexuality and those of the Global South as static and authoritarian? What happens when the taxonomical imperative in dominant Western logics of sexuality encounters same-sex practices in African and Indian Ocean texts, whose contexts are ones in which "gay" and "lesbian" are largely unspoken, unclassified categories? How do the two writers handle fugitive forms of erotic practice that exist outside the taxonomical schemes of dominant "sexuality" discourse? What forms of agency, if at all, do they recuperate from incognito and fugitive sex-acts? What might "queer" culture in North America in these texts look like if read from the perspective of "same-sex" erotic practices in East Africa? Read from the vantage point of gay and lesbian practices in California, how may queer culture in East Africa look? Is it possible to establish a universal critique of heteronormativity without resorting to the ruses of cultural imperialism?

Although acknowledging the conflicted existence of homosexual love and "identity" in the West, dominant twentieth-century human rights and queer discourses have tended to frame the above questions as a debate "between humanism and authoritarianism."[35] Though well-meaning, such binarism may provide ideological pretexts for extending the reach of the disciplinary power of, and surveillance by, metropolitan Western states that continue to sustain unequal global structures of the sort that *Migritude* questions. A case in point is the British Prime Minister David Cameron who, with an eye on his domestic British constituency and little regard for the many planes of conflict in Africa, has linked aid to African countries to whether or not they persecute gays and lesbians.[36]My central intention here is not to discuss the all-too-real persecution of Africans, diasporic or otherwise, who love people of their sex, but to highlight the dangers of conflating the persecution of homosexuals with an older attitude that insists there is value in veiling sex-acts in mystery. Such conflation is implicit in the "coming out" discourse which associates silence with unfreedom. Again, the intention is not to cast notions of the erotic in the Global South as the pre-modern of capitalism and human rights discourse, but to relate them to an expanded politics, in ways that acknowledge the historical and contemporary importance of sexual silence. It is a commonly held view, from commentators across the gamut of dominant opinion, that queer is a non-existent, occult or unreadable category in large parts of the Global South, especially in Africa.[37] The culturally conservative president of Kenya between 1978 and 2002, Daniel ArapMoi,

once claimed in response to the tabling of queer identity as an agendum for the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing 1995, that "words like lesbianism and homosexuality do not exist in African languages," in spite of the fact that the Kenyan official, national language, Swahili, includes a few such words.[38] At the same time, the neocolonial state over which he presided forbade same-sex sexual acts, drawing attention to their existence in the country. Moi's stance was to be echoed in several post-colonial African states in the 1990s, a decade that witnessed attempts on the part of Western states and their agencies to subject African countries to renewed forms of surveillance in the name of a new world order, democracy and human rights. Because of the overlapping of post-colonial politics, gender, national, racial and class power on a global scale, *Migritude* and *Ode to Lata* are worthy of attention for their presentation of multiple frames of reference for understanding queer desire.

*Migritude* can be read primarily as an imaginative counter-history of migration and commodities in the age of imperialism and capitalism, a challenge to what Vijay Prashad calls "mobile capital and immobile race."[39] At the same time, it is an autobiography by a global anti-imperialist activist haunted by a middle-class upbringing in a former colony. In its partial borrowing of its key title, "migritude," from the African-Caribbean literary-cultural school of Negritude, it is a declaration of being both inside and outside the saga of imperialism, diaspora, nation and capital. Taking on a defiant "attitude" and granting itself a great degree of "latitude," the book challenges the condition of invisibility visited upon laboring people of the Global South. If Negritude's lasting contribution to black Atlantic discourse was its privileging of the importance of black expressive arts in modernity, *Migritude* attempts to restore material culture to Negritude's act of "writing back." In its prelude, entitled "How Ambi Became Paisley," the book presents a dissident (queer?) history of Asian textiles and sartorial style. It traces the routes through which textiles commonly known in English as muslin, paisley and cashmere have traveled, from their beginnings in West and South Asia, to their violent appropriation by the British Empire. This work of historical excavation shows how imperial violence is encoded in the English language and its acts of naming. While the English names "muslin" and "cashmere" bear traces of the places in which these textiles were invented, Mosul and Kashmir, respectively, these histories are masked by the Anglicized naming. In the case of "Ambi," which is rendered in English as Paisley, any such traces are completely erased and full credit given to the Scottish weaving village, Paisley. In a context dominated by late capitalism, one of whose key creeds is intellectual property rights, Patel's book draws attention to the ways in which the creativity and work of laboring people of the ex-colonial world continue to be taken for granted. Hence, "And a hundred and fifty years later, chai became a/beverage invented in California" (*Migritude*, 7). Its rage fed by the American War on Terror which provides

it with its vision of global, anti-imperial solidarity, *Migritude* is remarkable for its ability to move beyond a restricted focus on the experiences of "brown" East Africans to envision globalization from the perspective of the ex-colonized world. In this, Patel is a descendant of Ngugi wa Thiong'o who has played a leading role among East African writers by identifying peasant and working people's struggles in the region with the struggles of their counterparts elsewhere in the world.

Another way in which *Migritude* can be read is to consider how Patel deals with the fears of migrant Indians in a post-colonial Kenya marked by class and racial inequality. Born in the very year that General Idi Amin ordered the expulsion of the Indian diaspora from neighbouring Uganda, Patel records that her Gujarati middle-class family, like others, lived in fear of political violence and material dispossession. However, her sense of fear and rage does not slide into melancholia about the troubled present, which in M. G. Vassanji's fiction often transmutes into nostalgia for East Africa's colonial past.[40] She links post-colonial violence in East Africa partly to empire, which becomes the focus of her rage, enabling her to perceive broader senses of belonging with people from the ex-colonized world. Like Vassanji, Patel recalls how the uncertainties of a migrant existence fostered a culture of "portability" in Indian East Africans.

> . . . Don't put down roots. Don't get too
> comfortable. By dawn, we may be on the move, forced
> to reinvent ourselves in order to survive. Invest only in
> what we can carry. Passports. Education. Jewellery.
>
> (*Migritude*, 10)

For young Shailja, this lesson is received through stories she is told about an Indian man who arrives in Nairobi on a train from Kampala "who held his toddler child and cried/Cried aloud, through a wide-open mouth" for a wife dragged from the train compartment by soldiers and then raped (11). She links this act of violence in Uganda with similar acts elsewhere in the world: the Belgian amputation of Congolese limbs in the first act of genocide in colonial Africa, the British amputation of the hands of Indian weavers to protect British textile producers from competition, the rape of Maasai women by British soldiers stationed in post-independence Kenya and the American bombing of Afghani civilians in the War on Terror.

One of the most complex problems that *Migritude* is likely to present to readers is Patel's desire for global solidarity when, as she notes, such solidarities were denied to Kenyans, which in its turn raises questions about her tutelage for the role of counter-globalization activist. Patel's affinity to Kenya is disrupted by the fact that her knowledge of its history only begins when she is an adult living in the US. Although born in the early 1970s, she

hears of the Mau Mau peasant insurgency (1952–1960) against the British for the first time in 2006—a year after the publication of Caroline Elkin's *Britain's Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya* which is an implied intertext in *Migritude*. Instead of being introduced to the dire realities of the late colonial period in Kenya, she regrets that "We learned in school that we attained independence/Without bloodshed" (18). Patel implies that institutionalized amnesia about Kenya's colonial past has made it difficult for young Kenyans to develop historical knowledge about the country. However, there are other possible explanations about which she is silent, the first of which is the tenuous sense of affective citizenship that marks the relation of the Indian diaspora to East Africa, a phenomenon that is elaborated several times in this book. The second is the specific character of the middle-class schools of the sort that she attended in Kenya, which were inclined to downplay the fraught character of the country's class and racial politics. The middle-class character of her upbringing and the contradictions it engenders are implicit in the role that valuable acquisitions such as jewellery, passports and education play in her memories. If these items of value draw attention to the precarious existence of her family in the post-colonial world, they also mark her experience as privileged, different from that of the laboring migrants with whom she consciously forges solidarity.

How else can readers treat the claim that *Migritude* makes about the teaching of history in Kenyan schools during her childhood, in which the country's violent late-colonial period was purged? One approach may be to note that it is by affiliating with radical political communities in London and San Francisco that Patel has found a grammar for radical political involvement. If in the 1970s and 1980s, post-independence politics in her native Kenya had little space for "migritude" (politicized migrants with an attitude) her subsequent affiliation with traditions of Black anti-racism, queer, feminism and the anti-globalization movement in the UK and the US have enabled her to assert a political role. Another approach would be to see the book's claim as part of an autobiographical strategy in which the author's maturation into an activist-poet hinges upon the dramatic discovery of previously occluded pasts. Read as an affectation, the claim could be seen as consistent with a deliberate subversion of claims to "identity."

Queer subversion of identity is made clear in Patel's telling of the ways in which she, like other diasporic Indian girls in East Africa, is brought up with a certain stigma attached to her sex. Her mother puts special emphasis on the teaching that since young Shailja is not a boy she has to make up for this by being pretty. At the heart of the effort to project female beauty is the *sari*, a garment that from the point of view of diasporic nationalism symbolizes ideal Gujarati/Indian femininity: vulnerability, docility and elegance. Part of Patel's intention in *Migritude* is to recuperate the *sari* from its status as a sign of a stereotypical femininity, a desire that is in keeping with her politics as a combative poet. As she grows into awareness, she discovers that the *sari*

means much more than normative femininity, for women combatants have worn it to battle while others in India routinely work in it at construction sites. In reconnecting with her parents and with the Gujarati language, she discovers that the supposedly traditional space of "home" is, in Gopinath's terms, an "archive . . . already ruptured, rent by colliding discourses around class, sexuality, and ethnic identity."[41] This discovery reconnects her to values she yearns for and enables her to relate differently to her education in Kenya. Having been prepared for the role of capitalism's "model minority"—a term used in the publicity material for the stage performance, "Migritude," to refer to those migrants who are best suited to fit into the West—Patel's reconnection with Gujarati marks an important turning point. She can now become "a radical artist," a queer post-colonial subject, one who stands in an ambivalent relationship both to her colonial and Gujarati inheritance.[42]

Set along a disporic axis that joins Mombasa—the Kenyan city on the Indian Ocean—with California, Mombasa-born Ghalib Shiraz Dhalla's first novel *Ode to Lata* (2002) has attracted attention because of the graphic realism through which it describes the sex life of its Kenyan-Indian narrator-protagonist, Ali, who has migrated from Kenya to West Hollywood in California. Often credited for being the first narrative of the South Asian gay experience by an author from the African continent, *Ode to Lata* comes after M. G. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets* (1994) in which queer is depicted, though largely as a silent and unspoken category as Alison Toron has noted.[43] In a brief but incisive reading of the novel, Evan Mwangi, who indicates a preference for allusive and figurative modes for writing sexuality, observes that the novel's depiction of homosexuality "in a representational mode" teeters dangerously towards the "pornographic." This, Mwangi argues, "entrenches the conventional belief that homosexuality is a monstrous and abnormal lifestyle."[44] While Mwangi's reading of the novel is defensible for its recognition that Dhalla reinforces the notion of queer as "deviant" and excessive, I suggest that the novel engages in a much more complex reflection on whether and how to name homosexuality, especially from the point of view of East African Asian cultures. If the insistent realism of the novel is likely to invite the disciplinary power of heteronormativity, as Mwangi suggests, Ali's memories of his sexual encounters in Mombasa and his fetishizing of the Bollywood singer Lata Mangeshkar render his supposedly traditional homes—India and Africa—as sites for queer desire.

Mombasa, the coastal city in which Ali spends his early years, has a long history of cosmopolitanism that goes back to the late Middle Ages.[45] Although the city expanded and changed considerably during British colonial rule, it maintains a distinctive cultural outlook, one of whose key characteristics is the longstanding acceptance of homosexuality.[46] However, the picture that Ode to Lata presents of the diasporic Indian Ismaili community in Mombasa is one in which homosexuality is a largely unspoken category. This code of silence is the focus of some of the most thoughtful passages in the novel which turn on the problem of translating "homosexuality" across

different cultural sites. When he returns to Mombasa on a family visit, and finds out that his old lover Nawaz is engaged to be married, Ali is struck by the contrasts between the gay scene in California and same-sex sexuality in Mombasa:

> Having lived in America for a few years, I had acclimated to a people who in supporting sexual diversity had ironically adopted the labels and classifications best cast aside if one is to be recognized as an equal, irrespective of whom they desire sexually. Back home there appeared to be no such rigid classifications, no such pronouncement, and everyone appeared just randomly scattered on that bell curve of sexuality that eluded labels. Unless of course one was flamboyant in demeanor. Straight? Gay? Lesbian? It seemed as if everyone was none of these and all of these. (94)

This does not mean, however, that indigenous linguistic markers for sexuality do not exist in Mombasa and elsewhere on the East African coast. When Ali reunites with Nawaz during the above-mentioned visit to Mombasa, the latter teases him for consorting with "all those *shogas*" (97) in America, *shogas* being an Anglicized plural for the pejorative Swahili slang for homosexual, *shoga*. Ali is torn between reading Nawaz's accusation as a hypocritical denial of the latter's own sexuality and as an acknowledgement of the absence of homosexual "identity" in Mombasa. Nawaz's differentiation of his own sexual practice from that of the *shogas* of West Hollywood points to the general unease with taxonomy in the "gay" scene in Mombasa. However, his attempt to set himself apart from "all those *shogas*" in the West (97), as he derogatorily calls them, also points to his own naïve belief that he is out of the reach of discursive practices that stigmatize queer bodies in the West as abject and diseased. In the Mombasa context, the usage of *shoga* to describe men who love men already encodes the workings of power, which expresses itself in classification and homophobia. In the glossary to the novel, the author blanks out this history of Swahili coding of male–male sexuality by attributing the word *shoga* to Kutchi, a language spoken in north-western India and also in East African urban areas where diasporas from Kutch and Gujarat have settled (292). Primarily a Swahili reference by a woman for her woman friend, especially an older one who has socialized her into womanhood, *shoga* as a contemporary reference for "homosexuality" encodes the fluidity of Swahili gender-nomenclature. The fact that it is a slang word in present usage suggests that the anxiety about same-sex sex acts which it encodes is a recent one. In Swahili, the pejorative *msenge* would be the closest reference for Ali's "femme" positioning relative to his lovers, a place that he associates with "real power" (115). In a gesture that undermines his rejection of the biopolitical impulse towards classification, Ali as narrator traces his "femme" positioning through a recognizably Freudian framework as the product of a childhood identification with an abused but indulgent mother

and disidentification with an alcoholic and womanizing father. The use of Freud to make sense of his own past suggests that Ali's story cannot really be read outside canonical Western discourses of psychoanalysis, identity and sexuality, all of which turn on taxonomy and "truth." However, this canonical framework is undermined by Ali's insistent, but ultimately unresolved, comparison of what queer is from the point of view of his old and new locations.

*Ode to Lata* invites a contrapuntal reading that sets same-sex "sexuality" in East Africa and the US against and alongside one another, drawing attention, on the one hand, to how the politics of "identity" denudes sex of much of its shadowy pleasures and, on the other, to the perils of same-sex eroticism "outside" the ambit of identity discourse. Having traveled the axis that joins Mombasa to West Hollywood, Ali registers a considerable degree of confusion and instability in his sexual life, especially in regard to the way he might name and live it. From the vantage point of a Californian experience, Ali struggles to understand his relationship to Nawaz who is engaged to be married to a woman in Mombasa. Is Nawaz "gay …Or just oversexed" (98) and prepared to fulfill his desires with whomever he can? Are figures like Nawaz "Practical-minded bisexuals who had modified their tastes or just suppressed individuals?" (101). Is same-sex erotic practice in contexts already captured by the biopower of the modern state any different from that carried out in contexts that operate on an older logic that endorses sex but only as a shadowy, hidden category? *Ode to Lata* shows that the advanced biopower of the American state and late capitalism "legitimize[s] preferences by providing the forum and places for expression" (100), but also produces human bodies as differentiated commodities chasing yet other commodities. Deeply constitutive of gay "identity" in California, pride marches, bars, nightclubs, sex clubs, highly fetishized senses of the "body beautiful", the idea of romantic love, and the racial marking (and marketing) of bodies simultaneously free and confine Ali in ways that leave him puzzled right to the end of the novel. For instance, his encounter with the Nelson McGhee, a "butch" African-American character, reiterates the old trope of the black über-masculine that has captured American racial imaginaries since the country's founding in slavery. Ali himself is marked as a "South Asian" in ways that embarrass him as well as raise his fetishistic value in his sexual encounters. Reading *Ode to Lata* contrapuntally, through the similarities and differences that mark queer practice in India, East Africa and the US, disturbs "colonial constructions of 'Third World' sexualities as anterior, pre-modern and in need of Western political development" (Gopinath, 12).

Dhalla disturbs the narrative of Western sexual practice as "development" through Ali's ruminations on how Indians have come to be associated with sexual prudishness in the contemporary period, against a longer historical background in which Indians "practically invented the art" of eroticism itself (187). Ali in his archaeology attributes the regression to Mogul and British

colonial rule both of which professed "a virulent trait [of]... puritanism" (188), later taken up by Indian nationalists such as Nehru and Gandhi. In tracing a historical thread that demonstrates the complicity of Islam, British colonialism and Hindu nationalism in denying Indian queer formations, Dhalla refuses narratives of redemption that fall back on notions of cultural purity. At the same time, this complicity undermines myths of Western sexual exceptionalism. In his ambivalent relation to California, Mombasa, and the Ismaili faith (represented principally by his mother) Ali shows that there are no safe spaces to be queer. Like Patel in *Migritude*, Ali eventually reconciles with a mother whom he discovers is more commodious and charged with contradictions than he had initially imagined. In see-sawing between extremes—valorizing the California gay scene and repudiating it, standing both inside and outside diasporic Indian nationalism, yearning for the anonymity of "gay" life in Mombasa as well as pointing to its limitations—Ali demonstrates that self-reflexivity is an important act of responsibility to the self. Although the novel ultimately rejects any notion of return to a safe domestic scene—whether filial, religious, national or racial—Ali's revisiting of his past in Mombasa shows that there are no unproblematic sites for occupying a queer subjectivity.

Families and homes generally function in East African Asian writing as restraints on desire, but this suppression has an important role in the historical constitution of the Asian communities of East Africa that Vassanji writes. Like Rosemary Marangoly George, I have raised the question: "Is the idea of home the terrain of conservative discourses alone?"[47] In response, I have considered how apparently conservative discourses of domesticity and sexuality are committed to the creation of community, and how they often become tools in the hands of a wide array of social actors in search of power. However, if the bulk of Vassanji's fiction assumes a heterosexual, diasporic Indian subject, Shailja Patel and Ghalib Dhalla complicate the narrative of diasporic nationalism. Standing inside and outside diasporic communities by virtue of a queer orientation enables the protagonists of Patel and Dhalla to forge new, insurgent and imaginative affiliations. Queer unwrites the heterosexual romance of the diaspora-nation, making it possible for Patel, in particular, to conceive of a radical politics that disrupts the communal narratives of a middle-class diaspora. At the same time, Dhalla and Patel write the Global South as a multifaceted site for queer practice, but raise questions about the desirability of naming desire.

# 6
# Miscegenation and Culture

In a discussion of the history of the East African Indians, Dana April Seidenberg has argued that the relative proximity of the region to the Indian sub-continent has meant that the diaspora has tended to look to the land of origins as the sole locus of its cultural heritage and inspiration. Unlike the Caribbean case where the descendants of nineteenth century indentured Indian laborers were integral to the creation of a creolized culture that also includes African, European and Chinese elements, "feudal hierarchies and religious prohibitions of pre-modern India" have persisted in the East African case, freezing the lives of the immigrants on "a sociological order of rigid vertical relationships." In the colonial period, the above was compounded by laws which sought to define the roles of racial groups within the economy, an arrangement which found favor among "sectarian group elites" who were consequently intolerant of any attempts by members to step out of the "sectarian group or commercial circle."[1] The older forms of sectarian loyalty have been buttressed by the imperatives of the competitive capitalist marketplace, and the attendant need for survival, which have only deepened the isolation of the diaspora. Although exclusion has created economic success, it has been detrimental in terms of social integration. The moral policemen who have acted as guardians of tradition have contributed immensely to the lack of meaningful interaction and acculturation among Asians and Africans, Asians and Europeans, or even among the different Asian communities themselves. By generating moral panics, these purveyors of cultural purity have managed to portray their interest in power, and their "systematic discipline over the behaviour of their group members," as the "transcendent values of Old India."[2] In the decade leading to independence, and in the post-independence years, this history of cultural exclusivism has routinely been invoked by African nationalist figures, culminating sometimes in the denial of citizenship, the withdrawal of business licences, and—most famously—the Ugandan Asian expulsions of 1972. For Seidenberg and many other commentators, group solidarity and the attendant ethnocentrism have contributed significantly to the friction between

the diaspora and other communities in East Africa.[3] Indeed, the image of the cultural separation of Asian Africans is legion in literatures from East and Southern Africa as Charles Sarvan has shown.[4]

For East African Asian writers, the popular image of diasporic Asian communities as hermetic has been a source of much anxiety, especially because of their cosmopolitan aspirations as intellectuals. The Ugandan political scientist Mahmood Mamdani recalls that as a young scholar of left-wing nationalist persuasion, he "shared with most progressive African intellectuals I know, an aversion to identifying with our immediate communities: whether you define them as ethnic, tribal, religious or racial. More than any other place I know, it is in Africa that progressive intellectuals pretended to be universal intellectuals, without an anchor in the ground below. If you were a Muganda, the mark of your progressiveness was that you consciously avoided speaking or writing in Luganda; if you were an Asian, you considered yourself apart from the Asian question."[5] This unease about identifying too closely with one's community sprung from the need to forge inclusive forms of citizenship that would not be hindered by the sectarian interests that threatened the universalistic ambitions of modernity. The irony remains that the very sectarian divisions that modernist intellectuals sought to contain had themselves been exacerbated by modernity itself, but that is not to be my primary point of investigation in this chapter. Rather, I would like to examine how East African Indian writing has attempted to deal with the enduring image of Indian cultural indifference and isolation. By focusing on the fiction of Moyez Vassanji and Bahadur Tejani, one can get a glimpse into the ways in which Asian African intellectuals have sought imaginative answers to what is clearly one of the most sensitive questions in contemporary discussions of immigrant Asian cultures in Africa. One of the key preoccupations of these writers has been how to negotiate the multifarious demands of ethnicity, nationhood and the idea of a universal humanity, for indeed it requires a considerable degree of dexterity to be not only Indian and African, but also British and sometimes North American. If the quest for universality has been the defining tenet of modernity, it also needs to be conceded that the demands of a modern capitalist order have also created conditions for atomization on an unprecedented scale, which militated against the ideal of universality. This chapter is about how the writers in question have mobilized the notion of "cultural synthesis," a popular concept in East African literary thought in the 1960s and 1970s, as a bulwark against sectarian divisions. Alongside the emphasis on the history, or the necessity, of cultural synthesis have also been attempts by some of those who have written on Indian cultures in East Africa to promote what Charles Taylor calls a "politics of recognition" (of otherness), within an ethic of multiculturalism.[6]

Within the context of East African literary criticism, the term "cultural synthesis" is generally associated with the region's first generation of writers

in English—Taban lo Liyong, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Okot p'Bitek—who proposed it as a cure for the alienation caused by colonial modernity.[7] Long before Homi Bhabha made "hybridity" a fashionable term for approaching the culture of (post-)colonial modernity, this group of writers had toyed with the notion of syncretism as a way of transcending the anxieties of the colonized subject occupying the bewildering position of a "child of two worlds."[8] The puzzlement of colonized subjects within colonial modernity was due to several factors, among which were the breakdown of traditional social values, the colonial education that drew away Africans from their immediate realities while promising ideals they could never really attain, the proletarianization of the colonized, who then had to negotiate new relations with their families and communities, the yoking together of people of diverse origins in schools, plantations and factories, among others. According to Wanjala, these conditions, potentially acculturating as they were, created alienation, especially if new values were accepted by the colonized without being fully integrated into them.[9] "Cultural synthesis" was simply then a way of integrating new experiences so that they did not retain their strangeness, but became assimilated by the colonized. It was not the foreign element in itself that alienated the colonial subject, but his or her inability to direct the manner of encounter with it. In a colonial situation, the people's failure to direct the way in which newness entered their world was overdetermined from without. As such, the pursuit of cultural synthesis, the harmonization of the familiar and the new, was an act of resistance, an ascendance to subjecthood and a rejection of the cultural logic of colonialism. Cultural synthesis was to be distinguished from what Okot p'Bitek famously tagged as "this business of 'apemanship' "—imitation without discrimination.[10] For these writers, then, the problem was not mimicry *per se*, but the necessity of native agency in the process of acculturation. From the vantage of post-colonial theory, which I shall discuss in more detail shortly, Wanjala's and p'Bitek's stance might seem unusual, for we have come to associate syncretism with a Bhabha-esque ambivalence: the view that hybridity produces an entity that is "*almost the same but not quite . . . [a]lmost the same but not white.*"[11] If Bhabha is concerned about how hybridity can *undermine* colonial power, this group of intellectuals was more interested in the way in which hybridization could *establish* the presence of the colonized in modernity.

Bhabha's creed of ambivalence is prefigured in the early career of the Ugandan/Sudanese man of letters, Taban lo Liyong, who once proclaimed that "I have accepted my position between the horns of a dilemma" in reference to his interstitial position between his African heritage and the new intellectual vistas opened up by colonialism, between an African cultural nationalism he doubted and a mainstream Euro-American modernity, which restricted his claims to that of a poor cousin.[12] Although his collection of essays, *The Last Word*—incidentally subtitled as "Cultural Synthesism"

and also the first full-length book of literary essays by an East African—was an attempt to gesture at a kind of synthesis, he doubted the possibility of synthesis given that, in his view, African culture did not have "classic" pieces that could match Homer, Dostoevsky, Shakespeare, Bach, and Beethoven, thus militating against an equitable exchange.[13] For this stance, lo Liyong was branded an ambassador of Western culture, especially by the critic Chris Wanjala, but what his critics ignored was his immense contribution in integrating the resources of East African oral cultures with the written form.[14] His carefully cultivated image as a maverick—an avant-garde affectation with the intention of dispelling orthodoxy from cultural debate—was often read as a sign of apemanship.

Lo Liyong was also controversial for promoting a version of hybridity that echoed the biologism of nineteenth century discourses of race. The critical difference is that whereas the "half-caste" was supposed to represent racial degeneration in Victorian racial science,[15] in lo Liyong's hands, it came to represent the kind of vigor that is characteristic of that person who has "inherit[ed]/The best there is from both." Lo Liyong evoked the figure of the miscegenated not to evoke the fear of racial destruction, but to celebrate "A world relative and comparative/A world shrunk by Orville and Marconi/A world that knows no boundaries/A world in flux," as if in anticipation of the more recent rhetoric of globalism.[16] What distinguished lo Liyong's treatment of the question of race from that of recent post-colonial theory is that his "half-castes" presupposed the existence of "races" with distinct cultural and biological attributes that could be fused together, through marriage, to the benefit of all. This benign belief in the existence of races is what many scholars have named "racialism," as distinct from the more pernicious logic of "racism."[17] Quite clearly, the figure of the half-caste, who is also celebrated in East African Asian fiction as a harbinger for cultural change, is weighed down by the discourse of race which precedes and enables it. This thinking yokes together culture and race, although in tenuous and precarious ways.

The other key concept germane to understanding cultural politics in East African Indian fiction, especially that of Vassanji, is multiculturalism, or the "politics of recognition" as Charles Taylor calls it. For Taylor, and indeed for other contributors to *Multiculturalism*, to talk of multiculturalism is to reflect upon the crisis of modern liberalism and its creed of tolerance. Taylor begins from the observation that within contemporary politics, the demand by minority and marginal groups to be considered worthy of recognition as entities with unique identities and needs has taken on a special significance. This demand for the recognition of the group does not necessarily dispense with the need to acknowledge the individual, for the identity of the individual is seen as continuous with that of his or her group. In this view, recognition for the individual is possible only if the group to which he

or she belongs is treated with respect in the first place. The upshot of this is that recognition enables the group and its members to express a sense of self that they would otherwise be denied. Nonetheless, Taylor realizes that the politics of recognition seems to depend on the ideal of "authenticity" associated with Rousseau and Herder: "being true to myself and my own particular way of being."[18] His way out of this impasse is to argue that there are two distinct ways of approaching the problem, with the second being the more enlightened one: to take identity as being of a "monological" character in the style of Herder (as generated uniquely by each group or individual), or as "dialogical" (generated intersubjectively, together with others with whom one shares language).[19] I consider briefly the relevance of the politics of recognition with particular reference to Vassanji's fiction.

Although he has been instrumental in making cultural synthesis once again a significant category in East African literature, Vassanji is also notable for his insistence on diversity. Synthesis may lead to new cultures, but it does not really erase the boundaries of cultural identification in his works, which do not express a desire for cultural homogenization. This raises a number of questions, the most important of which is that the cultural boundaries that his works maintain are the very ones that hybridization was supposed to have disrupted in the first place. The enduring power of the community as a source of identity in Vassanji's work is such that Neil Bissoondath has complained, in a reading of *No New Land*, that he "often fails to present his background material with sufficient subtlety, so that community submerges character (i.e. the individual)."[20] Vassanji's work also invites questions about what it actually means to celebrate a politics of multiculturalism when its direct antecedent is the colonial policy of "multiracialism" which was pursued in late colonial East Africa with the intention of containing the anti-colonial movements.[21]

This chapter deals mainly with the works of two authors. The first work it considers is Tejani's *Day After Tomorrow* which, though a courageous attempt at imagining a more tolerant society, is deeply engrossed in and limited by raciological ideas, which frame the author's understanding of what intercultural reciprocity might look like. The second set of works is Vassanji's collection of short stories, *Uhuru Street*, and his first novel, *The Gunny Sack*, both of which dramatize the tension between the necessity for the diaspora to maintain the integrity of community and the need to accept their hybrid status in the face of claims to racial purity. These two works present interesting opportunities for a discussion of the place of power relations in shaping cultural exchange. The last example is Vassanji's novel *The Book of Secrets*, which I read with particular attention to the way in which it points to the limits of a multicultural politics of recognition at a colonial outpost. I argue that it provides a useful illustration of how power circumscribes the possibilities for meaningful cultural exchange.

## Bahadur Tejani's *Day After Tomorrow*

Tejani's novel *Day After Tomorrow* is unique in the *oeuvre* of Indian writers from East Africa for it is one of the few in which a romantic relationship between an African and an Indian succeeds. In the writings of Vassanji and other Indian East African writers, such relations often come to an end owing to communal pressure.[22] Many such relations are doomed from the start, as they are conducted between unequals, for instance, a prostitute and her customer, a trader and her slave-concubine, and so on. The uniqueness of Tejani's novel, in this regard, probably owes to the fact that it was written before the expulsion of Ugandan Indians in 1972, a time when optimism about the future of Indian communities in the region did not seem unreasonable. As with Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack*, the romance at the center of the novel can be read as an allegory for cultural bridging, for it envisions a future free of race. It is instructive that the novel is set in Kampala, "the city of a new civilization," a site of "fear [and] palpitating desire," a modern place in which newness can take root (5). The narrative recounts how Samsher's marriage to Nanziri, which represents the hopes and fears of a multicultural nation, has come to be. The story that Tejani weaves is of an Indian trading community whose relation to the African world is informed by a sense of physical proximity and cultural distance, mutual dependence and fear. In the culture of the Wepari, any kinds of relations between the Africans and the Indians, except those between traders and their customers are discouraged: "Miscegenation was a crime the elders would never forgive. Because colour prejudice by the fair Aryans against the dark Dravidians was as old as India itself" (58). This seclusion of the Wepari families from the world of the Africans is further encouraged by colonial policies of segregation in operation at the time. It is against this background that Samsher's romance with Nanziri is remarkable as it symbolizes the threat of an ontological crisis within the rigid world of colonial bureaucracy and poses an uncomfortable challenge to the color prejudices of the traders.

In putting a cultural renegade at the center of his narrative, Tejani created a figure who was to become a quintessential one in East African Indian writing: the figure of the outsider, the half-caste, the pariah. For Tejani, a proper understanding of self and others could only be achieved by subjects located in the interstices between ethnic or national cultures. To understand himself, Samsher has to stand outside himself and see himself through a stranger's eyes. In his alienation from himself and his community, he gains important insights into what is required to build a viable post-colonial society. One of the most important insights that Tejani arrived at is that cultural insecurity, the release of the self from its traditional moorings, is a precondition for freedom, and that "identity crisis" provides the basis for a genuine humanism (144). In an interview with Annie Koshi, Tejani has stated that "change and perhaps its inevitable friend instability are essential parts of

creative living."[23] In taking this view, Tejani influenced later writers like Peter Nazareth and Moyez Vassanji, whose works are populated with outcasts and half-castes. To be a misfit is to see with a clear eye and with the advantage of a different perspective; to be a cultural hybrid is to occupy a liminal zone from which you understand many cultures without necessarily being immersed in any. For Tejani, the world unleashed by modernity allows an "imaginative idealism, an open-mindedness, a belief in possibilities" and "sympathy for human effort" to take root (*Day After Tomorrow*, 143). In order to attain these, Samsher has to discover the stranger in himself. It is in his desire to be another, to immerse himself in the world of the Africans, that he realizes the futuristic world of the title. If the trend among many nationalist African scholars around the time the novel was written was to bemoan the alienation wrought on the colonized subject by modernity and colonialism, Tejani saw in alienation a necessary recipe for the creation of "a new civilization" (5). He considered the culture of the Indian diaspora in East Africa to be so alienated from an essential humanness that only an act of disidentification and alienation from it would spell freedom for those who subscribed to it. Samsher's decision to pursue a new basis for his being is spurred on by what he considers the repressive and narrow context in which he is raised. The merchants are generally an unimaginative lot, spiteful of the arts, lacking in a worldly outlook, and concerned primarily with survival in what they see as a hostile country. Conversely, Samsher regards the cultures of the Africans as life-giving, in tune with nature, spontaneous and free.

In contrast to the Wepari, whose relation to the land is marked by fear and a sense of alienness, the Africans of Tejani's novel live harmoniously with their environment. Constantly, Tejani presents a picture of African society in which there is a seamless link between humans and the natural world. *Day After Tomorrow* is both an attempt to will a modern reality into being and a paean to a world threatened by the age of modern mechanization in which people are reduced, like the *Wepari*, to "lifeless automatons" (57). The cosmopolitan exchanges made possible by modernity may be laudable, but Tejani still bemoans the threat modernity poses to the integrity of the pre-colonial and the "natural" world.

The uncritical celebration of Africa, the sweeping denunciation of the Indian diaspora and the failure to move beyond a narrow culturalism constitutes the greatest weakness in Tejani's depiction of cultural synthesis in the novel. The Indian diaspora in East Africa played a part in the modernization of the region in ways in which the Africans did not, but this by no means meant that the latter remained innocent and shielded from modernity, contrary to Samsher's view. It is only by locating the novel within the tradition of Negritude that we can account for the fact that it says little about what Africans could learn from the Indian diaspora, while making it seem that it is the diaspora that has a sense of lack that could be ended by borrowing from the Africans. After all, the Africans of Negritude were the "salt of

the earth," fated with replenishing the depleted emotional reserves of the modern world. Samsher understands Africans as bearers of a culture of the primeval body, much closer to the essence of humanness than the Indians and the Europeans. This urge to reach out and to understand Africa is "a call in the blood" (7–8), a libidinal quest "to transcend the difference of separate bodies" (111). The novel is sprinkled throughout with the language of nineteenth century racial science, which was filtered through, although in a benign form, into Negritude. Samsher is enchanted by the "strong negro smell" (117) that Nanziri exudes and by "[t]he strong black bodies, suffused with the sense of life, of power and vitality of blood" (94). The description of the child Samsher has together with Nanziri is, however, the strongest indicator of the reductive biological ideas behind Tejani's celebration of romantic relationships across the color divide:

> A child plays on the verandah. He is a child of a new civilization. He is fair and brown like an Indian: but he has the bright teeth of the African and his curly hair. He is the life that has been forged from the union of parents of different races. The mother is African: the father is Indian.
>
> The boy is four years old. But already he has stout thighs, beautiful rounded and full buttocks and a rich healthy brown body which makes him look like a young god. The rich brown shines through with the finished gloss of mahogany wood. The mixed blood of two races proudly announcing itself. (6)

What certain strands of nineteenth century racial science had frowned upon as degeneracy, Tejani's narrative inverts into a thing of value. That the novel focuses more on hybridization as a physiological process rather than a cultural one, however, shows just how much the author's ideas are arrested within the biological determinism of the Victorians.[24] But if the narrative's focus on the phenotypical traits of the child seems uncomfortably similar to the preoccupations of early twentieth century eugenists, it would be important to remember that Tejani's aims are far more humane than those of the eugenists. However, the fact that his liberal vision affirms the common humanity of the Africans and the Indians, and the fact that it is based on sounder ethics than the fascism that was soon to take root in Uganda, should not blind readers to its inadequacies.

As several studies show, Indian exclusivity was not simply the expression of deep-seated cultural prejudices "as old as India itself" as Tejani would have it (*Day After Tomorrow*, 58), but rather a rational response to changing modern conditions. The dominant groups within Indian communities which actively promoted racial exclusion may have played their part in colonial racism, but their drive for separateness was hardly the result of some ancient "racial itch," or the "race instinct."[25] In a study of gender among

Tanzanian Asian communities, Richa Nagar observes that "For Hindus and Muslims from lower classes, safeguarding of religious or racial purity was not a major consideration in migration decisions . . . not all the lower class men could afford to return home to get brides who could fulfill their sexual needs and take care of their households. For these men, African women served as a 'refuge'."[26] It is only later, after the attainment of relative economic prosperity, that the principle of caste endogamy was rigidly enforced on a wider scale. Insisting on purity was partly a way of ensuring that communal economic gains were consolidated, and partly a function of religious demands. As Nagar shows, the economy provided enabling conditions for religious observance, even as religion also came to shape economic relations. Therefore, the challenge for Tejani would have been to come to grips with the modernity of cultural "traditions." However, it is by downplaying the modernity of both African and diasporic Indian cultural life, their enmeshment in the contradictions unleashed by colonial modernity, and by appealing to some primal sense of human sensuality that Tejani is able to enact a kind of African-Indian integration.

The ahistorical approach by Tejani to African society is cast into sharp relief by events that were to happen soon after the publication of the novel. Five years after Tejani first drafted the novel and only a year after its publication, General Idi Amin expelled the Ugandan Indians. In the face of the expulsion, Tejani's idealistic notions of African society seemed far-removed contemporary realities in Uganda. He provides a glimpse of his rude epiphany in "Farewell Uganda" which appeared two years after the expulsion.[27]

## Mutant cultures and authenticity in Vassanji's *Uhuru Street* and *The Gunny Sack*

If Bahadur Tejani writes at a nationalist moment, and under the shadow of the liberal humanist notion of universality, in which hybridity is promoted as a way of fostering integration, Vassanji's works are informed by a strong suspicion about the grand narratives of liberal humanism and nationalism. The result is that, although he endorses hybridity as a way of bridging the gaps created by colonialism and archaic models of culture, he does not desire the obliteration of cultural differences as such. The basis of this difference between the two authors is well accounted for by Jamie James who observes, in a discussion of migrant Indian writers in Toronto, that "Many of the people I met on a recent visit to Toronto made a great fuss about how Canada's multiculturalism differs from the multiculturalism of the United States, invoking metaphors such as the mosaic and the salad bowl as opposed to the melting pot . . . . 'When you come to Canada, you don't have to leave the other country behind.' "[28] If Tejani's model is the American ideal of the melting pot, in which the newly arrived immigrants would be

subsumed into a mainstream, hybrid national identity, the Canadian variant of multiculturalism described above is sceptical of assimilation. The above description of two models of hybridity and multiculturalism is incomplete given that there are still powerful interests that would define Canada as white and English speaking, as Vassanji's *No New Land* shows. In the United States, there exists a strong tradition of separatist multiculturalism witnessed in Arthur Schlesinger Jr's famous complaint amidst the culture wars of the 1980s and 90s that "the melting pot has yielded to the Tower of Babel."[29] Whatever the nuances that complicate the two models of multiculturalism, it is clear that whereas Tejani seeks a synthesis of antagonistic cultural entities, hybridity in Vassanji's works is characterized by a noisy, Salman Rushdie-like sense of multiplicity and polyphony, with no desire for a merger of disparate cultures.[30] If for Tejani, hybridity is the ending of contradiction, for Vassanji, it is "the predicament of 'in-between' societies—in this case East and West." He speaks of "the confusion of modern India, where you have all these contradictory things going on. I am sure there are lots of people there who can quote Marx or Hegel and then believe in something very traditional, probably astrology, and that, I think, is very Indian."[31]

Vassanji's simultaneous embrace of hybridity (with its connotations of synthesis) and multiculturalism (with its connotation of separatism) arises out of a contradictory desire. He seeks to challenge the kind of cultural separatism that has historically fostered hostility against the Indian diaspora and, simultaneously, to undermine the cultural monism characteristic of cultural imperialism and nationalism. Vassanji's approach to multiculturalism and hybridity is evidently poised on the horns of a dilemma. His ambivalence in this regard can also be attributed to his allegiance to post-colonial theory, with its creed of contradiction and ambivalence. Of all the major East African Indian writers, he is the one whose writing mirrors most the concerns that have come to be associated with contemporary Third World émigré intellectuals resident in the West. The influence of Salman Rushdie on his work is so considerable that several critics have drawn parallels between the two authors. *The Gunny Sack*, for instance, is described in the publisher's blurb as "Africa's answer to *Midnight's Children*." Indeed, several passages in the novel make intertextual references to Rushdie's novel. Yet Vassanji's embrace of ambivalence needs to be seen in relation to the particular history from which he has emerged, and not just the global intellectual currents from which he has tapped. That historical context is East Africa during colonialism and its aftermath.

That Vassanji's concern with hybridity and multiculturalism is an attempt to deal with the cultural crisis of colonialism in East Africa can be seen in his first novel *The Gunny Sack*. The setting is a time soon after Zanzibari independence:

> At a Diwali celebration, the Prime Minister of Zanzibar said that Asians must intermarry with Africans. To which Hassan Uncle retorted in the privacy of our store, 'What did I tell you?' And a letter in the *Herald*, written by a Mr White, unfortunate under the circumstances, said, 'Do wildebeest and zebra mate? Do giraffes mate with elephants, or lions with leopards?' and concluded with a quotation from Kipling. To this, our tireless letter-writer A. A. Raghvaji, a.k.a. Nuru Poni, replied: 'When wildebeest and zebra, and any of the other pairs mentioned by Mr White mate, nothing happens, but when people of two races combine, beautiful children are born with the virtues of both races and the prejudices of neither, one must hope.' (185)

Here, as elsewhere in his work, Vassanji pits the colonial logic of racial separatism—the colonial version of multiculturalism—against the idea of the basic oneness of humanity. The Mr White of the passage proceeds from the assumption that the different human "races" are different species, and therefore separate by nature. There is a striking parallel between this quotation and the one in Tejanis's *Day After Tomorrow*, which eulogizes the child of Samsher and Nanziri. The two passages are linked together by their assertion that hybridity can provide an escape route from the racial prejudice that is characteristic of colonial culture.

Vassanji, like Tejani, puts "half-castes" at the center of his narrative in order that he might be able to undermine the idea of race altogether. If racism depends on the idea of the incommensurability of racial difference, the half-caste lends a lie to that claim, for he or she acts as a bridge that reconciles the putatively irreconcilable. *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets*, as indeed a number of stories in *Uhuru Street*, have many characters descended from Indian and African, Indian and Arab, and Indian and European. These "half-castes" are metaphors for cultural in-betweenness. Often ostracized by their kin, they are usually driven by the urge to subvert the rigid cultural formations that have ensured their alienation. In a sense, their alienation becomes an advantage in that they become harbingers of rebellion and change, as opposed to those who continue to believe that they are culturally and racially pure. In the short story "In the Quiet of a Sunday Afternoon" in *Uhuru Street*, the "half-caste" narrator is placed on the margins of a migrant community which still hangs onto rigid caste structures. Given his pedigree, or the lack of one, a marriage is arranged between him and a woman named Baby—derived from her child-like plumpness—whom he does not desire. Owing to his status—as half-servant, half-relative—the marriage arrangement is presented to him by his family without the expectation that he may question it. However, it is because he is already considered an outsider by his family and his new in-laws that he is able to violate the demands of the caste system. He abandons Baby and elopes with Zarina

whom his father-in-law, Hussein German, dismisses as being of a "third class family" (7).

A more sustained treatment of the figure of the "half-caste" is offered in *The Gunny Sack* in which Dhanji, the founding patriarch of the Govindji family, takes up an African slave-woman, Bibi Taratibu, as his concubine. This marriage is the cause of much moral panic in Dhanji's village back in Gujarat, and he eventually gives it up for one with an Indian woman of Zanzibar, Fatima. However, this attempt to obliterate any link with Africa is futile for he already has a son with Taratibu. Huseni, as the boy is called, is significant as a figure for cultural transgression and an iconoclasm: he frustrates the attempts by the diaspora to contain identity within racial or ethnic categories. Against his father's demand that he should not consort with "slaves" (Africans) because he is "descended from the Solar Race," he runs away (22). The narrative describes his rebellious disposition thus:

> They called the half-caste Huseni 'Simba': lion. He was the kind of boy who unerringly senses all that is forbidden or feared in the home and proceeds to do them one by one; whose single-minded purpose in life is a relentless enmity towards his father, whose every move he tries to thwart, every rise in esteem he tries to bring down. (14)

Indeed, all of Govindji's descendants by Bibi Taratibu are marked by precisely this kind of restlessness, which the narrative attributes to their status as "half-castes." Juma, Huseni's son and father to Salim, the equally restless narrator, also shows irreverence towards family traditions. Treated as a second-class citizen—"nothing more than a glorified servant; whom the family sent away on pretexts when important guests arrived; who never sat in a car except with the chauffeur; . . . who more often ate in the kitchen than at the table" (63)—he takes pleasure in offending the sensibilities of his pious relatives by going to the mosque drunk and generally engaging in what the narrator calls "wild exploits" (65). The restlessness of these half-castes—and the motif of running away in which they play a central part—is a figure for cultural quest and change: a challenge to the reification of identity by Indian traditions and the colonial state.

As Hammond and Jablow have noted in their study of British writing about Africa, the half-caste has functioned historically within colonialism as a source of much anxiety: "The half-caste was as difficult and uncomfortable a by-product of empire as the Westernized African, and the novelists were as censorious of him. There is neither humor nor sympathy in the portrayals, rather a shuddering withdrawal as from something repulsive and disquieting. The 'taint of the tar-brush' was a stigma, eliciting the same reaction of hostility as the Westernized African, and for the same reasons. In regard to the half-caste there was an additional factor involving the racist

imperative to maintain the purity of blood lines."[32] The reason colonial writers recoiled from the figure of the miscegenated was that it threatened to destroy what Bhabha calls the "narcissistic authority" of colonialism, its rhetoric of purity and European exceptionalism.[33] In the case of Vassanji's works, the "mixed-race" characters act similarly to undermine the racial and cultural narcissism of the Indians. Huseni, as a figure of transgression, dissolves the binary opposition between African and Indian that his father, and the larger Shamsi cultural system, would like to keep.[34] Given the negative attitude to "half-castes," it is ironical that Dhanji Govindji ends up squandering all his resources, and emptying the community's coffers, in an attempt to find the son who has brought so much shame to his name, showing just how precarious is the Shamsi understanding of who belongs and who does not.

This sense of the fragility of the claims of identity is further emphasized in the narratorial insistence, in virtually all of Vassanji's works, that there are no absolute moments of origin to be recovered. In *The Gunny Sack*, the narrator reminds the reader that the Shamsi were Hindu before they became Muslim, a way of mocking the sectarian, inter-communal quarrels that characterized Indian politics especially in late colonial East Africa. Even the purity of Govindji, the patriarch, is questioned since he is a "translated" subject—one who has crossed the Indian Ocean and thus lost any organic attachment to his origins. The mongrel status of his lineage is made explicit in the controversy that surrounds his name:

> Dhanji Govindji. How much lies buried in a name . . . A name as banya in its aspiration for wealth as Hindu; yet gloriously, unabashedly, Muslim. For the esoteric sect of the Shamsis there was no difference. But Govindji, the elders will tell you is not a family name—where is the attak, the last name, that can pin you down to your caste, your village, your trade? Absent, dropped by those to whom neither caste nor ancestral village mattered any longer. Later this irksome Govindji too was dropped by one branch of the family and replaced with Hasham. Whence Hasham, an Arab clan name? (10)

As the passage shows, India cannot be the basis of a coherent narrative of identity, for the lives of the Shamsi in India was itself marked by exchange between Hindu and Muslim, Gujarati and Arab, and so on. Having crossed the *kala pani*—the black waters that divide Africa from the Indian sub-continent—the immigrants' claiming of India as the absolute locus of their heritage is dismissed by the novel as an elaborate fiction, an "imaginary homeland" deliberately fashioned as a remedy for displacement.[35] The notion of authenticity upon which such a claim depends is further dispelled by the untidy history of exchange and coexistence on the East African littoral. As indicated in the introduction to this chapter, the rhetoric

of authenticity normally depends on a monological notion of identity—as the product of a single consciousness that is true to itself. It is predicated on the assumption that "I have a way of being that is all my own." It "speaks of the real self buried there, the self one has to dig out and express."[36] Against this view, Vassanji seeks to show how the quest for the "true" self can lead to cultural authoritarianism, limiting human potential in the process. His most sustained assault on authenticity can be seen in *Uhuru Street*.

The short story collection begins with an item that thematizes class and ethnic paranoia in an insular Indian family in colonial Dar es Salaam and ends with one that celebrates the disquiet within migrant Indian culture that has been cut loose in a post-independence characterized by increasing restlessness, migration and the pressures of globalization. The passage from "In The Quiet of a Sunday Afternoon" at the beginning to "All Worlds Are Possible Now" at the very end of the collection is marked by several moments of epiphany, rupture and departure as the migrants create and embrace new realities. As the collection unfolds, the migrant Indian community reaches out to others, embraces change, and begins to negate certain trappings of tradition. However, this is done without denying the roots of the modern Indian subject. The result of this careful balancing act between memory and change is a "mutant," an entity whose cultural reach expands without a total loss of a sense of origins (88).

Vassanji's setting of his stories on a street is deliberate for the street is "a crossroads of influences,"[37] a metaphor for the trafficking of ideas and the interaction of people from disparate origins. It is a concentrated model of the cultural syncretism unleashed on East Africa by the pre-colonial Indian Ocean trade, and later by colonial and post-colonial modernity. As Vassanji himself indicates in the foreword to the collection, Dar es Salaam, the Tanzanian city in which the stories are set, is on "a coast that over the centuries was visited by Arab, Indian, and European: traveller and merchant, slave trader, missionary and coloniser" (ix). Given this long history of exchange, cultural influences from the outside are therefore so pervasive that the foreign has lost its strangeness. Although the household in which the narrator-protagonist of the story "Ali" grows is putatively Indian, he grows up with Abunuwasi stories of Arabic-Swahili folklore, the American cowboy sagas of Roy Rogers, and the exploits of the gun-slinging Shane. In "The Relief From Drill", the open-air market (the *mnada*) is a makeshift affair along a street in which can be found goods from all over the world, such as "Japanese perfumes with exotic-sounding Arabic names" (44). If the street functions as a terrestrial "chronotope" that connects people and cultures from the whole globe, compressing space and time in the process, Vassanji also develops the maritime image of the ship, which serves a similar function:[38]

> The ships that pass here no longer carry portents of faraway, impossible worlds . . . All worlds are possible now. Shadowy vessels cheerlessly ply these waters, bringers of unaffordable goods, reminders of deprivation, enticements to get up and go. Silent pipers, whom we follow by jet planes, those who can, and stretch ourselves between lives as contrary as the ends of a cross.
>
> ("All Worlds Are Possible Now," *Uhuru Street*, 130)

The ship, as Paul Gilroy has famously stated, is key for any understanding of modern culture for it is a "living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion . . . Ships immediately focus attention . . . on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artefacts: tracts, books, gramophone records, and choirs."[39] Similarly, Vassanji uses the figure of the ship to draw attention to global interdependencies. If in traditional society, people's lives are dominated by localized activities and therefore a sense of familiarity, the coastal East African societies that Vassanji depicts are characterized by extensive places across the ocean, a phenomenon that undermines the metaphysics of presence. However, if Gilroy seems hesitant to deal with the ship as a figure for exploitation and economic disparity—save for the references to the middle passage—Vassanji is keen to show how the chronotopes of modernity act not merely as homogenizing cultural agents but also as reminders of global economic disparities. Indeed, it is the awareness by Vassanji's characters of those imbalances that leads to their incessant migration, especially to the Western metropolises. Pervasive in the collection is the theme of departure, which is reflected in titles such as "Leaving," "Breaking Loose," "The London-returned" and "Refugee." While he does not take an anti-globalization stance in these stories, Vassanji shows that the migration of the Indians is a function of the imbalances in a world-system created by colonialism and also of the feeling of Third World provincialism fostered by cultural imperialism: the belief that the center is somewhere else. If "alienation" is the missing term in much of current cultural theory, one cannot read Vassanji's works without getting a strong sense that to do away with it is a sure way of becoming blinded to the agonies—cultural and otherwise—of marginality in the world-system.

Vassanji's creed of hybridity and his assault on notion of authenticity is, arguably, best demonstrated in the story "Breaking Loose," which explores the possibility of "break[ing] away from tribalism" to release the human potential trapped by cultural conventions, an emancipatory process, which he seems to consider as a precondition for social amity (90). Yasmin's antagonist, who later becomes her friend, is an intellectually robust but contradictory Ghanaian professor, Daniel Akoto. At first Akoto accuses Yasmin and other young Dar Indians for being colonized by Western culture because

of their preference for rock and roll. At this stage in the story's development, Akoto sees cultural borrowing purely in negative terms, as a sign of assimilation. A tussle ensues between the two, with Yasmin pointing out Akoto's own contradictions, for instance, how his obsession with "digging up the [African] roots" sits uneasily with his "European mannerisms, language, clothes—suits even in hot weather"—and a quaint love for antique gramophones (85–86). That Akoto appears to Yasmin as the quintessential picture of "the English gentleman" is not surprising if we consider that the ideas of culture and tradition that he espouses have their origins in Victorian thought and in German Romanticism, as so many recent commentators on Pan-Africanism have noted (86).[40] The upshot of this is that Akoto is himself subject to the ambiguities that characterize all identities, even if he seeks to portray himself as a fully centered and unified subject.

Beyond her systematic unpacking of Akoto's claims of African exceptionalism, Yasmin also tries to understand what her Indian ancestry means in the context of her African (dis)location. At the beginning, she seems to have a reified notion of what her Indianness means: she understands it as a mummified artefact, to be exhibited at specific instances, and to be held in suspense in others. It is this disembodied and compartmentalized version of identity that leads to a debilitating sense of alienation, for it denies the synthesis of diverse elements that make up modern culture. Her moment of epiphany towards the end of the story, however, points to a more critical view in which she acknowledges that culture is an ordinary, existential phenomenon in the lives of people, as against her earlier essentialism:

> The world seemed a smaller place when she went back to the University. Smaller but exciting; teeming with people struggling, fighting, loving: surviving. And she was one of those people. People, bound by their own histories and traditions, seemed to her like puppets tied to strings: but then a new mutant broke loose, an event occurred, and lives changed, the world changed.
>
> (*Uhuru Street*, 88)

It is instructive that Yasmin arrives at this kind of knowledge not by shunning the idea of Indian culture but by reading about sub-continental Indian history. She comes to an awareness that her brandishing of Indian culture is merely a reaction to Akoto's aggressive claims about Africanness—a repudiation of the world outside—rather than a statement about her own situation. Like Tejani's Samsher, she discovers her humanness the moment she takes a step that estranges her from the orthodoxies of her community and her earlier allegiance to putatively "ancient customs, unchanged for generations" (88). At the end of the story, Yasmin and Akoto have become good friends and there are hints of a possible romance between them.

In *The Gunny Sack*, the task of preparing the ground for such reconciliation is left to the character who is most knowledgeable about history, Ji Bai. If all Salim has received from his mother, as far as the family history is concerned, is an elaborate tale of his excellent pedigree—"The Merchants of Pakistan are his uncles" (138)—it remains to Ji Bai to restore to him his true heritage as a mutant. Against the background of a Dar es Salaam setting where people are often reduced to "carrying the burden of [their] races" (228), Ji Bai, who acts as a voice of historical wisdom, has "[a]mong her friends . . . more Africans than Asians" (227). Although born in India, she proclaims herself as "Swahili . . . and Indian . . . and Arab . . . and European" and makes the puzzling declaration that "Nyerere is my son" (227–228). In her conversations with Salim, she recalls the early years of Indian settlement on the coast as "days of magic and spells . . . of Bantu medicines, Arab djinns and Indian bhuts . . . [all] under one roof running their nocturnal rounds" (25). The gunny sack that she bequeaths to him contains an eclectic jumble of mementoes—ledger books with entries in Arabic script, a Muslim shirt, and a Swahili cap—all of which attest to the placement of Salim's family history at the interstices of cultures. She embodies the hybridism of Kariakoo, the poor African quarter of Dar es Salaam whose "thousand faces" include Muslim kanzus, Indian frock-pachedis, Swahili khangas, American films and Western pop music (85–86). No matter the Indian origins of the Shamsi, the novel endeavours to show how Africa has become one of their places of origin. Indeed, all the attempts in the novel to deny this fact by erecting myths of a pure Shamsi identity end in failure.

Ji Bai's overt claim to a syncretic identity for the Shamsi is reinforced by the extremely eclectic character of the intertextual references of the novel. As Peter Nazareth has correctly observed, *The Gunny Sack* fits the bill of what Ishmael Reed would call a "gumbo," a book that tries to contain as many things as possible, ranging in this case from "oral African forms, pop music, movies, imported children's stories, . . . [to] *earlier works that have told only part of the story.*"[41] The novel displays its debt, and hence the debt of modern Shamsi culture, to the Arabic tradition through its citation of figures such as Schehrazade, Aladdin and Ali Baba from *The Arabian Nights*. The title of the seventh chapter, "View from the birij," is a humourous reference to Arthur Miller's play *A View From the Bridge*. Other notable texts from which the novel borrows include Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, Bahadur Tejani's *Day After Tomorrow*, Peter Nazareth's *In A Brown Mantle*, the German children's tales about Hansel and Gretel, and V. S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*, among many others.[42] The intertextuality of the novel is a way through which Vassanji conveys the sense that no cultural formation is self-contained, and no narrative of identity ever complete. He openly displays his indebtedness to other authors and texts not only to dispel the Romantic ideology of originality, but also to open to doubt the myths of authenticity which feed upon it. The noisy, fecund, bazaar-like atmosphere that

Vassanji evokes through his cross-textual references acts as a counterweight to the claims of cultural singularity that are mounted by African nationalists and Indian traditionalists alike. This cacophony of voices is further complemented by the insistent code-switching that takes place within the pages of the novel. The English of Salim's narrative is liberally sprinkled with Swahili, Gujarati and Cutchi words. Code-switching attests to the attempts by characters to bridge cultural-linguistic gulfs, and, ironically, to Vassanji's own concern with turning English into a vernacular—an authentic conveyor of local accents, moods and patterns of speech. Whereas the consistent usage of formal English would suggest a cultural unisonance that does not exist in the setting of the novel, the mixing of accents and languages in Salim's narrative is supposed to be a faithful rendering of the cultural situation in Dar es Salaam. Yet, it is important to ask whether the fecund scenes of hybridization that Vassanji presents in *The Gunny Sack* represent a saleable, exotic Third Worldism. Why is it that the novel, to use Amit Chaudhuri's phrasing, wears hybridity blatantly like a national costume, rather than let it show in subtly disruptive ways? Why the insistent "chutnification" of the English language, as Chaudhuri would have it? Writing about Indian fiction after Rushdie, Chaudhuri notes that "One of the subtlest ways, indeed, in which the multilingual imagination enters [texts] has to do with the use of English words—not transmuted or 'appropriated and subverted for the post-colonial's own ends', as the current dogma has it, but, estrangingly, in their ordinary and standard forms; yet this is a practice whose import has been insufficiently acknowledged or studied."[43] Could it be that the self-conscious hybridism of Vassanji's novel masks a certain crisis? Is it a case of over-compensation for long-festering historical problems?

As Peter Simatei has observed, the adoption by the Shamsi characters of the rhetoric of hybridity is often an attempt "to demonstrate the authenticity of their belonging to the new nation."[44] Witness, for instance, the assertion of the immigrants' Africanness against the background of the Ugandan expulsions:

> In Dar, at Amina's house, we said Tanzania is different, its Asians more truly African. Indians have been on the coast for centuries, and they speak English—Amina attested, having come from abroad—*quite* differently from Indian Indians. There is a distinct Swahili-ness to their English. And ask them, she exhorted, the Indian term for bakuli, or machungwa, or ndizi and you'll catch them at a loss .... And who would deny that a chapati, or a samosa or a curry were not Coastal food? Even biriyani. And you have seen the furniture of a traditional Swahili home? There you'll see Indian influence. And you have heard a Zanzibari taarabu? Hum it for an Indian and he'll give you the words in Hindi.
>
> (*The Gunny Sack*, 245)

In spite of these protestations of hybridity and nativity, the question still remains why the proclaimed sense of belonging has not translated into a greater sense of inter-racial harmony. The problem seems to emanate from at least two sources. First, the claim to a happy hybridism belies a long history of racial segregation, conflict, intolerance and persecution. As it turns out, the material and psychological consequences of the slave trade and colonialism cannot be automatically cancelled out by the simple fact that *biriyani* has been Africanized. Second, the narrator invests too much in the domain of expressive culture as the place in which racial harmony might be forged, when it is clear that it is not the sole focus of inter-racial conflict. Whereas the usefulness of a shared culture in preparing the ground for intercommunal reconciliation cannot be discounted, it is important to recall that the mere fact of a shared culture cannot by itself terminate conflict.

Much of the muddle in the narrator's treatment of hybridity springs from too casual a conflation of ontological questions with political ones. While ontological questions cannot be totally sequestered from political ones, it does not help to assume that clarifying the philosophical underpinnings of identity claims will automatically help in the production of a more desirable politics. It may indeed be that identity constructions are based on mystifications but this does not mean that they are useless or necessarily dangerous. And neither should it be assumed that once identity claims are shown to be based on myths—and by doing so underlined the shared humanity of people everywhere—that nationalism and ethnocentrism would have been dealt a blow. In highly racialized or ethnicized contexts, the emphasis on cultural difference is either a way of maintaining privilege or of mounting resistance against discrimination. Group identities are almost always informed by a sense of bad faith, a "strategic essentialism" that acts as an instrument in the jostling for power. Seen in this light, the proffering of a hybrid identity as a bulwark against prejudice could be seen as anchored on the weak premise that identity is the key source of social conflict and competition, when it is simply a codeword for other things. To assume that prejudice springs from ignorance—and thus the product of a counterfeit ontology—elides the possibility that ontology has already been subordinated to history. People may be quite aware of the syncretic status of what they regard as their own culture but still mobilize on the basis of an ostensibly pure cultural history because it secures their interest at a particular moment. This does not mean that they forget their hybrid past, but simply that they deliberately submerge it in an attempt to forge a united front. As *The Gunny Sack* itself shows, Shamsi ethnocentrism and Afrocentric prejudice exist in spite of the knowledge that Shamsis and Africans have of their syncretic identities. Indeed, it is the realization of their hybridity that leads them to a fervent search for pure identities in the first place, as they seek distinctive positions from which to contest for power. They may engage in these quests for different

reasons—with a view to protecting privilege in the case of the Shamsis, and with the intention of forming a united front against their historical exclusion from the formal economy in the case of the African nationalists—but the results are cultural formations whose basis is syncretic absolutism, "culture[s] that, in spite of these mixings, [are] consistently portrayed as stable."[45]

In a provocative reading of Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*, Joan Dayan warns that pronouncements about "the pleasures of hybridity, mobility, and surplus" often belie the reality that in "the globalized marketplace of consumers" not "all consumers are equal" and not "all cultures [are] available for consumption."[46] One of the most useful insights in Dayan's caustic essay is her call for social critics to take seriously the conditions in which hybridity is made possible, or rather, the place of power in cultural exchange and synthesis. Doing so is especially critical against the background of post-colonial cultural theories that suppress the historical association of hybridity and mimicry with the pressures of cultural imperialism. Indeed, it is this very history that has persuaded Timothy Brennan to observe that some of the clamour among specular border intellectuals about hybridity and cosmopolitanism is in effect "an assimilationism with dignity."[47] It does not make much sense to dismiss all instances of cultural nationalism as reactionary just as it would be risky to embrace all forms of hybridity as oppositional. The more interesting, but also more difficult, option is taking each example and studying it carefully for the interests it represses, its historical milieu and, indeed, what it seeks to defend. The liberal humanist conscience with its verities—"multiculturalism is good; colonialism and fundamentalism are bad, etc."[48]—offers too restricted a scheme that prevents an appreciation of the historical nuances without which reading is impoverished. The pitfalls of the indiscriminate celebration of cultural syncretism are explored below by looking at how, in the colonial context of Vassanji's fiction, much of what passes for cultural exchange is overdetermined by colonial power.

The impingement on hybridization by cultural imperialism is demonstrated in the short story collection, *Uhuru Street*, in which the desires of the characters are mediated through the categories of colonialism. Vassanji's submerged critique of colonial hybridity is evident in the short story "English Lessons." The story is essentially about a teacher's attempt to socialize his pupils into becoming English and their resistance to this. In a colonial context in which race has a special significance, it is a source of frustration to the students that Mr Stuart is not easy to classify either as European or Asian. To Mr Stuart, however, this difficulty presents an opportunity to access particular modes of colonial power, for it enables him to claim an affinity with whiteness: "It was not known in class where Stuart originally came from. He looked neither European nor Asian. He sounded English, but not quite. The conclusion was that he was a Eurasian, perhaps even a camouflaged Goan" (59). One way of reading Mr Stuart would be to see him as a figure of liminality, one that confounds the colonial obsession with purity.[49]

However, Vassanji presents a picture of the character that suggests quite the opposite. His place on the margins of Englishness means that his desire for affiliation with England is especially acute; in fact, he has a strong dislike for an eccentric teacher from England whom he views as an embarrassment to the English values. In the slipperiness of his identity in racial terms, he is intolerant of what he regards as the tainting of English culture by his students and fellow teachers.

The narrator writes Mr Stuart's longing for England as a form of displacement that can only be endured at the cost of estrangement from the immediate, visceral world of colony. Mr Stuart yearns for a "long ago, far away" England of which he was never a part, a case of nostalgia without memories to back it up: "The England of 1842. Young England, of rolling hills, lush forests, and stately homes. Where character was taught in schools . . . and honour and courage were not mere words" (59). His liminality, rather than being an indicator of any subversive potential on his part, only serves to underscore his isolation. His yearning for England dissipates whatever may have gone into fostering his recognition of colonial Tanganyika and its realities.

We can now attempt to understand why Vassanji's stories in *Uhuru Street* seem so pessimistic, why they dismiss the pursuit of modernity as a futile quest while also trying to celebrate the effects of globalization on the culture of the Indian diaspora. If globalization frees the diasporic community in the stories from their attachment to an increasingly hostile post-independence East Africa, the allure of modernity along the lines set largely by cultural imperialism threatens to immiserate any links the community has with its past. Caught between the repressed memories of an ancestry that threatens to break to the surface and an uncertain identity underwritten by a modernity they cannot trust, members of the diaspora occupy a state of limbo. The stories underscore the fact that colonial modernity is characterized by an impulse toward amnesia, and thus cannot guarantee social amity or the invention of a new image of self. It is only by seeing through the the more optimistic views about hybridity that post-colonial subjects can attain a meaningful cultural synthesis, so the stories seem to suggest. Most importantly, the stories illustrate how "hybridity, if at all, can never comprise an equal mixing of disparate strands" as it is anchored to "socio-cultural privilege."[50] This dependence of identity on political, economic and cultural hegemony is also sharply delineated in Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets*, which is my next item of discussion.

## *The Book of Secrets* and inter-cultural knowledge in the colonial world

Alfred Corbin, the colonial administrator in Vassanji's third novel *The Book of Secrets*, is one of the most unusual European figures in East African fiction for the way he tries to interact with the colonized people on their own terms.

Through him, Vassanji extends on a theme he began when he wrote his first novel *The Gunny Sack* and which has also predominated in contemporary discussions of multiculturalism: the possibility of cross-cultural concord. *The Book of Secrets* is an attempt to explore the meeting-points of the groups involved in the colonial process, an endeavour to re-imagine the frontiers of colonial power relations by a sustained attack on manicheism, whether nationalist or colonialist.

Although he is by nature a reticent character, Corbin, in a manner that Vassanji presents as being unusual for a colonial officer, allows himself a moment of vulnerability while on his posting at the town of Kikono in pre-World War I Kenya. He bares his soul to Mariamu, the Shamsi girl with whom his story becomes intertwined for the rest of the novel. The Indian traders of Kikono welcome him into their own community, although they deny him complete knowledge of their secrets, to his frustration. If the Shamsi of Kikono view Corbin's presence as invasive, Vassanji, true to his non-manichean approach to colonial history, weaves a narrative in which the mutuality of the relationship between the two parties (Corbin and the Shamsis) is emphasized, rather than confrontation.[51] Corbin tries to grasp the secrets of the Shamsi who, in turn, peer into their story which he has captured in his diary, in order to make his story their own. "To whom does the history of the colonial period belong?" the novel asks. The answer that Vassanji gives is that colonial history belongs both to the colonizers and the colonized.

Through the figure of Corbin, Vassanji meditates upon the possibility of a mutually enriching contact between different racial groups in the colonial world. He is interested in drawing an alternative picture of colonialism that is free of the diametric oppositions that have come to be associated with nationalist and colonialist writings. In writing *The Book of Secrets*, Vassanji is not merely interested in providing a picture of the predicament of culture under colonialism, but is also actively trying to inscribe a more humane version of colonialism than that which has ordinarily been represented in nationalist, post-independence writing from East Africa. Works of fiction, as Pierre Macherey and Etienne Balibar reminds us, are an attempt "to produce the effect, the illusion of the imaginary reconciliation of irreconcilable terms by displacing the whole ensemble of ideological contradictions onto the terrain of one of them, or one of their aspects, that of linguistic conflict."[52] Although works of fiction are inescapably bound up with the moments of their conception, they are also often imbued with a utopian element: the attempt to imagine realities outside the prisonhouse of a narrowly historical temporality. It is in their utopian elements, their desire to transcend historical circumstance, and to fashion their own pasts, that novels can truly be transformative. Corbin embodies the desire on Vassanji's part to imagine an alternative history of colonial culture in East Africa, for he (Corbin) is different from the standard image of the colonial administrator found

in the region's literature. But, as is typical of Vassanji's attempts to will alternative historical realities into being, this endeavour is subverted by the sheer tyranny of history.

Having stayed with the Shamsis in the backwater of Kikono, Corbin is skeptical of the attempts to transplant European society into Kenya and views the bourgeois European world in Nairobi as "a fraudulence," a "little England in Africa" (63). Corbin may elicit the reader's trust because of his disavowal of European cultural arrogance, but his relativist approach to the question of culture is also deeply instrumentalist in its intentions. In any case, "knowing the other" was a prerequisite for junior colonial officers like himself who had to "pass an examination in Swahili" to be eligible for promotion (40). Corbin desires complete transparence on the part of the native people but quickly realizes, when he hears the incessant drumbeats in the night, that "[t]here were layers of life here clearly inaccessible to him, deliberately hidden from him" in spite of his painstaking attempts at knowledge (77). The local people are prescient in realizing that his interest in them is not innocent, even when he continues in the belief that he means no harm. It later becomes clear that in developing a cordial relationship with the Indian traders, Corbin is ultimately interested in finding more efficient and humane ways of colonial governance. Hence he will try to glean as much as possible from them. He may be a romantic, but as a colonial administrator, in the end his unusual and potentially dissident relationship with the Shamsi will only be another step in the writing of a specifically British history. It is no wonder in the end that the Shamsis steal the diary in which he writes about his encounter with them, in order to claim his story as their own and to reverse what they see as an invasion of their lives (229).

Corbin as a person may be innocuous, but it is what he represents that ensures that his relationship with the people of Kikono will never be mutual in any meaningful way. In his encounters with the Indian traders and their families, he is genuinely concerned about behaving in ways that are not offensive to their sensibilities (43). He is comfortable enough in his dealings with his African subjects to find "their mysterious drums in the night" "irresistible" (75). Yet, his deference to local sensitivities borders on the manipulative, as in the episode where he makes the police band do a marchpast and persuades the government football team to "gracefully [accept] defeat from the locals" so that "the people [are] reminded of the dominant yet generous force in their midst" (74). The cause for this patronizing show of humility is the controversy that follows his attempts to intervene into what he regards as the Shamsi's maltreatment of Mariamu, the young woman for whom he has muted sexual desires. In the wake of his realization that the Indian cultures he idealizes are not themselves innocent, he briefly finds himself in a moral dilemma, between his relativist stance that every cultural system is good for those who subscribe to it, and the moral universalism that underpins his own upbringing within an imperial culture.

The beating of Mariamu by the old *maalim*, who believes he is exorcizing a bad spirit from the girl, soon unhinges Corbin from his relativist principles: "What I witnessed was a crime under the law, and I could not let it pass. And yet I had come upon what was evidently an accepted ceremony, involving respectable members of this town" (69). He is caught between the Shamsi townsfolk, who accuse him of meddling in a culture he does not understand, and the European women at the Christian Mission, who take a morally absolutist stance against Islam. This part of the novel marks that point that Corbin begins to realize that full knowledge of the other is impossible, and it is here that he asks the question that is also the epigraph to this section of the chapter: "how the devil do you deal with another culture's ghosts?" (72).

Corbin addresses his fear of the opaqueness of the Shamsis by recording their lives in his diary. Given his position within the imperial racial hierarchy, he seems to recognize that he cannot know the colonized unless he literally becomes one of them, a near impossible task. His careful diary-keeping is therefore a way in which he attempts to master and to render transparent the obdurate world that eludes him. If the Shamsi cultural system, in all its relative hermeticism, makes sense to its citizens, Corbin is interested in dissecting and laying it bare so that it can serve a utilitarian purpose within the "cannibalistic" imperial order. I use the term "cannibalism" here to refer to the ability of cultural systems to assimilate knowledge dervived from different cultural backgrounds and historical experiences. What becomes clear in *The Book of Secrets*, though, is that the hybridization of colonial power as it seeks to transcend its own eurocentrism does not constitute a radical break from the core tenets of colonialism as such. Corbin could be willing to concede that the cultures of the colonized have value, but such recognition of the limits of European cultural universalism does not detract from the central imperial concern for profits, productivity and control. In fact, such cross-cultural knowledge is a precondition for colonial power. It is therefore not surprising when, later in the novel, his earlier experiments with cultural relativism as a tool for governance provide the basis for his championing of "Indirect Rule" (205 & 233), a system that invented and manipulated "traditions" in the service of the British colonial empire. Corbin's experiments with cultural relativism provide a strong reminder that British colonialism was in fact an early champion of multiculturalist politics, what Mahmood Mamdani calls "decentralized despotism."[53]

Vassanji's thematic concern with hybridity and its problematic entanglement in the logic of colonialism is also brilliantly illustrated through the figure of the earnest Indian man "with the very Christian name Thomas," whom Corbin meets when he lands at the port of Mombasa upon his posting to East Africa (40). By scripting the figure of Thomas, Vassanji is returning to an idea mooted earlier in the short story "English Lessons" in the collection *Uhuru Street*, of the hybrid as a trickster, which I have discussed earlier

in the chapter. Vassanji casts Thomas in the mold of a "mimic man," who insinuates himself into the patronage of colonial authority in order to stand at an advantageous position over the rest of the colonized people.[54] More "English" than even Corbin himself, Thomas constantly embarrasses the former with his zealous dismissal of the culture of the Shamsis, on occasion slating the "heathen food" of the Shamsi townsfolk and foisting his "dreadful 'English' cuisine" on Corbin (44). Given his liberal attitudes, Corbin feels burdened by Thomas's zealous adoption of Englishness, and as a good multiculturalist, is at pains to distance himself from the sense of self-abnegation that he observes in his servant. What are readers to make of this particular double representation, which seems to run against the grain of Vassanji's authorial concern with hybridity as a harbinger for positive change in society? What does this important moment of equivocation mean for his art? It could be argued, contrary to any uni-dimensional standpoint, that his constant equivocation is also the strength of much of his work, which is appropriately informed by recognition of the complex and open-ended nature of history. In this self-reflexive and non-linear scheme, hybridity may mean one thing in one instance, but quite another in a separate context. It is for this reason that Thomas, as one face of syncretism, plays a role contrary to that of Salim and Huseni in *The Gunny Sack*. If the latter play a subversive role by interrogating the myth of race and community by virtue of their half-caste status, Thomas assumes a role that ultimately alienates him from the colonial power that he seeks and the people of Kikono whose recognition he desires. Thomas plays the role of the miscegenated-figure-as-trickster to the ultimate, reaping the benefits of his camouflage. However, his deftness at playing all sides in the colonial drama ultimately alienates him from everyone involved.

Thomas's anxious desire for identification with the Europeans is doomed from the onset, for the sense of identity and knowledge that he seeks is an instrument for the management of the colonial scene, not its negation. He embodies the desire to be the Other—European—not with the intention of realizing an unlimited potential for his own self, but precisely to foreclose the possibility of having to deal frontally with his Otherness within the imperial order. The nature of this quest makes Thomas the butt of Vassanji's laughter. Thomas may succeed in gaining an edge over the other Indians in Kikono, but he cannot garner their respect in the long term. He may grasp for the trappings of colonial civility, but he is doomed to failure since these trappings are simply instruments for the management of native desires. In one notable passage, the narrator, Pius Fernandez, retells how Thomas "had set covetous eyes on Miss Elliot," a European woman based at the local Christian Mission (86). However, as Gikandi reminds us, desires for the other and for knowledge in a colonial context "have no value in themselves except as mediators of the colonial power relation. Neither can be the basis of a new image of self, nor a means of transcending the prisonhouse of colonialism."[55]

To contextualize Gikandi's observation, it can be argued that Thomas's desire for Miss Elliot is spurred on by colonial discourse, which sets her whiteness as an unattainable ideal: by pursuing her, he remains trapped within the logic of colonialism that renders him powerless and whose grasp he attempts to escape by garnering power over the other Indians. It is interesting that, subsequent to his rejection by Miss Elliot, he seduces a local girl at the mission, as if to return to the "heathen" scene he had earlier rejected.

Vassanji's representation of Thomas is understandably limited by the fact that we encounter him mostly through the fleeting impressions recorded in Corbin's diary. Telling the story of the colonized people through the diary of a colonial officer means that those people's lives largely appear to the extent that they are part of the colonial relationship. Their sense of agency is subordinated to, and submerged by, Corbin's overriding need to show how he battles to make sense of the strange world in which he is a lonely sojourner. For example, he disapproves of Thomas's apemanship and detribalization but declines to lay bare the social structures that make mimicry one of the ways through which the colonized can gain leverage within the colonial order. Denied this necessary contextual scaffolding, Thomas emerges as a ludicrous figure that attracts little sympathy. These formal limitations notwithstanding, *The Book of Secrets* provides a strong—though nuanced—critique of cultural hybridity. The colonizer's quest to know the colonized, as seen in Corbin's cultural relativism, is ultimately a ruse for power and control. Similarly, the colonized's attempts to erase colonial boundaries, as exemplified in Thomas' attitude towards all things English, is a tool for social mobility at the expense of other colonized people. Although it might help in bridging the racial cleavages in society, it nurtures new class divisions in their place. Thus, it could be argued that Vassanji, in spite of his embrace of hybridization, shows an awareness of the limitations of the process in regard to the establishing of a more tolerant and truly open society.

Vassanji and Tejani generally dwell on the responses of the East Africa Asian diaspora to the fact of dislocation, and their attempts to negotiate new ways of being in what are often strange or hostile contexts. They explore creative ways of confronting the diasporic predicament beyond the defensive building of communal myths. Their writing is therefore concerned very much with the borders of community and the possibilities that cultural interaction with others might open up. In line with this quest to transcend the over-integrated conceptions of cultural identity that deny the multiple heritage of the Indian diaspora, they consider the ways in which diasporic subjects can participate in the fashioning of an inclusive culture of politics in East Africa, and beyond. An important aspect of this quest for a cosmopolitan utopia is to highlight the hybrid status of the modern subject in East Africa. However, this search for alternative modes of diasporic subjectivity is burdened by the very loadedness of the term "hybridity" itself and its inevitable mediation by political, economic and cultural hegemony.

I have therefore suggested that it is necessary, in reading this body of literature, to try to uncouple the more enabling meanings of the term from the more problematic aspects of its history. For example, there is need to discriminate between modalities of hybridity such as assimilation, internalized self-negation, political co-optation, social conformism, creative transcendence or even cruder versions of Victorian racial science. In any case, processes of cultural exchange are very much within the sphere of power, making hybridity enormously variable and contingent upon historical specificities. While it may not help to dismiss, *tout court*, the humanist ideal of universalism that is at the core of post-colonial celebrations of hybridity, I have tried to show that hybridization alone is not a sufficient condition for social amity. If anything, my contention has been that, in spite of its capacity for a lot of good, its popularity within post-colonial literary studies is more an indicator of the crisis of humanist universalism than an acknowledgement of the power of cultural exchange, for greater hybridization in the modern world has not necessarily meant the cessation of conflict. Although colonial modernity facilitated an unprecedented scale of cultural contact, this has also been accompanied by high levels of atomization as people jostle for prized resources. Cultural exchange might, in theory, pose a threat to particularistic notions of being as embodied in nationalism and ethnicity, but it seems that nations and ethnic groups will continue to have relevance in a global context characterized by competition, not only between individuals and groups, but also between regions. Perhaps it is time to take up Brennan's cue and ask, "If the nation is dead, why doesn't Henry Kissinger know it?"[56]

# 7
# Romancing Decolonization

This chapter discusses the representation of decolonization in the works of Jagjit Singh and Kuldip Sondhi, and the politics underlying such representation, by examining four topical questions that have preoccupied the writers: the scapegoating of the Asian diaspora through the use of stereotype in the era of independence, the idea of the nation-as-one, the nationalist politics of "integration" and the marginalization of the diaspora by the new states after independence. For reasons elucidated in the course of the chapter, these questions have been of great concern within Asian communities in East Africa and are thus given a salient place in the literature under scrutiny. The centrality of these questions in the works to be examined has very much to do with the ascendance of a narrowly nativist approach to national politics in the era of independence. The exclusivist claim to national belonging that is at the heart of nativism has a history that is traceable to the logic of colonialism whose manicheism it reproduces. Given its parochial approach to the meaning of citizenship, there are very good reasons for writers to look askance at nativism. Yet all too often, critiques of indigenism turn into blanket dismissals of anti-colonial nationalism, or pretexts for the undermining of anti-imperialist stances on culture and politics. The same could be said for ostensibly radical critiques of elite nationalism, which have, in the words of Neil Lazarus, provided the pretext for critics "to disavow nationalism *tout court.*"[1] In response to this act of reduction, Lazarus calls for the disaggregation of nationalism in order to salvage, from its singular image as an always totalitarian formation, those insurgent aspects whose history is often occluded.

I have chosen to begin this chapter on a cautionary note because of a concern that, though posited against a reactionary politics of indigenism, the overall critique of nationalism in East African Asian writing sometimes stands the risk of falling silent about the factors that gave rise to nationalism in the first place. Despite the salience of its disparagement of anti-colonial nationalism as essentialist, totalitarian and authoritarian, this particular critique often fails to treat in any meaningful way the compelling historical

questions that have been at the heart of the quest for nationhood in the region. This chapter is therefore as much a discourse on the value of nationalism and the meaning of independence as it is a critique of indigenism and an acknowledgement of the pitfalls of nationalism. The duality of this approach owes to the fact that nationalism is a profoundly bifurcated historical phenomenon, containing many conflicting strands, bearing at once the interests of the elites and what Ranajit Guha regards as the autonomous "politics of the people."[2] Naming it as one thing therefore means denying its multiple possibilities, which is what post-nativist post-colonial critiques often do. My argument is that the primary impulse behind the widespread hostility to nationalism is faith in the Enlightenment category of universalism, which national allegiance supposedly negates. There are also those who oppose nationalism because it overwrites differences within so-called nations.[3] To the extent that universalism undermines political parochialism of the sort that has led to genocidal terror in the modern period, it is indeed unquestionable. Yet, to assume parochialism can simply be dealt with by embracing the idea of universal humanity indicates a failure to reckon with the complexity of historical processes. Although it could be desirable to grasp something larger than one's parochial position as a member of a particular nation, class, gender or ethnic group, that outcome cannot be achieved merely by renouncing those attachments. As Terry Eagleton has noted, nationalist struggle, as indeed any other political struggle, will "necessarily be caught up in the very metaphysical categories it hopes finally to abolish."[4] To wish one's position away in such a struggle is merely "to play straight into the hands of the oppressor," so he argues in his reiteration of the dialectic, which is shot through with a strong sense of irony.[5] To illustrate this point, we could note that although radical African nationalism was interested in the abolition of blackness, which for Frantz Fanon was a white man's fantasy, there was no way around the concept of blackness; it was only by embracing it that those interpellated as "black" could hope to end it.[6] Colonial identity categories may have been born as fantasies, but were soon given weight through historical processes that can be denied only at the risk of idealism.

The story is often told of Ambu H. Patel, a Kenyan journalist, book-binder, printer and activist of Indian origin who, on the day of Kenya's independence, was ejected from a bus that was carrying a group of jubilant African freedom fighters to the *Uhuru* celebrations. Patel, having good anti-colonial credentials himself, had joined the crowd in the hope for a new nationhood transcending the divisions of colonialism. On that very day, 12 December 1963, Patel had published at his own expense a book detailing world-wide responses to Jomo Kenyatta's incarceration: *Struggle for 'Release Jomo & His Colleagues'*.[7] During the state of emergency, which had ended three years previously, he had housed and supported Margaret Kenyatta, the eldest daughter of the famed nationalist. A Gandhist whose relationship to Jomo

Kenyatta was like that of a disciple to his *guru*, Patel had, throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, used his skills as a book-binder and printer to distribute leaflets and posters to draw attention to the unfair imprisonment of the Kenyan nationalist leader.[8] Given his contribution to anti-colonial politics in the preceding decade, the irony of his ejection from the bus must have struck him with considerable force. Yet he wasn't unique in this. East African Asian history is replete with such stories of cooperation during the anti-colonial struggle and abandonment at the attainment of *Uhuru*. There is Makhan Singh, the doyen of Kenyan trade unionism, detained by the British for his communist and anti-colonial activities during the 1950s, but ignored by the Kenyatta regime after *Uhuru*. There is also Pio Gama Pinto, a supporter of the Mau Mau cause, imprisoned by the British in the 1950s, but who later became independent Kenya's first political martyr, allegedly assassinated by agents of the Kenyatta state in 1965.[9] However, the regularity with which these stories are told often belies a more complicated reality. In the thick of their participation in anti-colonial activism, such Indian activists were often spurned for undermining the interests of the commerce-oriented diaspora.[10] In post-colonial death and abandonment, Pinto and Singh provide alibis for the disavowal of and function as emblems for the diaspora's betrayal by *Uhuru* (independence). The post-independence marginalization of Indian anti-colonial radicals by African nationalists, and the diaspora's belated embrace of those radicals is a staple in East African Asian writing.

Although several figures within Indian communities actively identified with the aims and activities of the nationalist movements during the colonial period, political independence caused unease in the diaspora. Commenting on the phenomenon of Kenyan nationalism from the vantage-point of post-independence failure, the famous Kenyan-Goan barrister John Maximian Nazareth in his autobiography *Brown Man Black Country* takes a line of distrust towards nationalism by relying on the authority of the Indian statesman, Jawaharlal Nehru: "Nationalism is essentially an anti-feeling, and it feeds and fattens on hatred and anger against other national groups."[11] This wariness about the break-up of the colonial state and its replacement by an African nationalist regime might seem a strange position for Nazareth to take, given that his autobiography begins by providing an account of his record as an anti-colonial campaigner. But such is the nature of anti-colonialism that it contains such contrary currents. As Frantz Fanon notes at the beginning of his famous essay, "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness," "the battle against colonialism does not run straight away along the lines of nationalism."[12] For Fanon, agitation against colonial injustices and the general clamor for democracy within the colonial situation does not automatically translate into a desire for nationhood. The potential for decolonization lies, rather, in the will to power inherent in the inversion, by the colonized, of the manicheism of colonialism: "The last shall be first and the first last."[13] For J. M. Nazareth and many of his liberal contemporaries,

the desire for a complete overhaul of the colonial situation, as suggested in Fanon's apocalyptic phrase, was a cause for worry, even if they also agitated for formal political freedoms. Generally, East African Asian writers who have written about colonialism and independence have had to maneuver through the contradictions evinced by J. M. Nazareth's autobiography. Like him, they have been compelled to write from a position that Arun Mukherjee has named as "a hard place."[14] They might be Third World, ex-colonial subjects, but their commonality with other ex-colonial subjects cannot merely be assumed. Even when they speak as ex-colonial subjects, they cannot necessarily position themselves as the voice of the colonized. As Mukherjee points out, there has been a tendency to write a flattened third world subject without much attention paid to the peculiar circumstances of the people who supposedly belong to that world. There has been a misleading literary image of the ex-colonial world as one that is engaged in the resistant act of "writing back to the center," even when the historical reality is that ex-colonial societies are extremely diverse.[15] Asian East African writing presents a refutation of this "resistance" version of Third World literatures.

In the introduction to this book, I consider how the colonial political economy produced a racially stratified society whose effects carried over into the moment of *Uhuru*, as the story of Ambulal Patel shows. To have a fuller understanding of the strained relationship between the diaspora and the nation, it is important to go beyond a mere consideration of the political economy, for the crisis also has its roots in diasporic unease about the exclusionary ways in which the nation is narrated. If the nation's flaw is the discrepancy between how it is lived and how its story is told, then it is useful to look at narrative as a category that would help to explain the anxieties caused by nationalism. In his essay "DissemiNation," Homi Bhabha states that:

> In the metaphor of the national community as the 'many as one', the *one* is now both the tendency to totalize the social in a homogenous empty time, and the repetition of that minus in the origin, the less-than-one that intervenes with a metonymic, iterative temporality.[16]

Bhabha's lines can be read to mean that, as metonymy—a part that substitutes the whole—the nation works to suppress what it deems excessive in order that it might grasp its essence in narrative. Even more importantly, there is a powerful suggestion in the essay that the nation seeks to entrench its story by presenting itself as ahistorical, a modern repetition of an ancestral time. At the heart of the nation is therefore a tussle between what Bhabha calls the "performative" and the "pedagogical," by which I read him to mean that the neat stories of the nation—and the lessons of their telling—are constantly undermined by the reality of living within the nation, and by the fact that each recitation of the national story is done with a difference.[17]

Nothing illustrates Bhabha's argument about the nationalist quest for narrative form, and the eventual fracturing of that narrative, than the position taken by one of East Africa's foremost anti-colonial nationalists, Tom Mboya, whom I quote at length:

> This [the anti-colonial] mobilization is based on a simplification of the struggle into certain slogans and into *one* distinct idea, which everyone can understand without arguing about the details of policy or of governmental programme after Independence.... Everyone is taught to know one enemy—the colonial power—and the one goal—independence. This is conveyed by the *one word* round which the movement's slogans are built. In Ghana it was 'Free-dom', in East Africa it is 'Uhuru' and in Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland 'Kwacha' (the dawn). In this way one word summarizes for everyone the meaning of the struggle, and *within this broad meaning everyone has his own interpretation* of what Uhuru will bring for him. The interpretation of the goal is not immediately relevant or important, when compared with the importance of mobilization of the entire population.... The *people have to be organized so that they are like an army: they must have a general, they must have discipline*, they must have a symbol.[18]
>
> (my emphasis)

Mboya suggests that beneath the popular image of the nation-as-one, the nation is not really one thing; its meanings lie chaotically with "the people." The nationalist message seeks simplicity, rendered through memorable formulae that "the people" can readily understand, but the popular reception of the nationalist message also means a decentering of that message.[19] For if nationalism means everything to everybody, it really has no coherent center. Although the national story insists that the nation has already become, the nation is always in the process of becoming; it continues to tell its stories so openly as to betray itself as artifice. Although Bhabha would most likely celebrate Mboya's view of nationalism as a parchment upon which every citizen can write a personal story, told in each instance with a "difference," such open-endedness is also the undoing of post-independence nationalism. To extend the metaphor of the citizen as an inscriber of national meaning, it is crucial to note that not every citizen can "write:" individuals have unequal abilities to make themselves heard in the public sphere. Mboya's democratic gesture simply means that only those who are most strategically placed in relation to the new centers of power will have their interests catered for. If there is such a fundamental looseness to the meanings of nationalism and what it is supposed to bring, then a determined minority can easily ensure that their own parochial interest is thrust to the center of the nationalist agenda. This problem is at the heart of Peter Nazareth's novel *In a Brown Mantle*, which narrates the dissembling of anti-colonial nationalism as it is

taken over by narrow elite interests. The problem with nationalism for the writers in question is as much a function of the way its stories have been told as it is for the materiality of post-colonial East African societies.

Beyond nationalism's roots in the colonial political economy, which I have hinted at, it is important to explore the nation as a language for, as Bhabha avers, the nation is a notion that does not rest merely on a "sociological solidity."[20] For this reason alone, it is crucial to reflect upon the way the romance of the nation functions, in interaction, with the political economy, even though the truths of the nation cannot be reduced to its symbols.[21] Critical readings of nationalism ought to temper the textualism of Bhabha's position with stances that take history more seriously as a mode for understanding the relationship between literature and society.

The stories of Pinto, Patel, Singh and J. M. Nazareth, which I have recounted, are important because thinking about them helps to address several questions about colonial and post-colonial social relations that are especially salient in East African Asian writing. How did racial identities come to attain such an ossified character within East African society? Why is it that Indian compatriots to the African nationalists soon came to be seen as interlopers? By joining scenes of national performance, were Indian radicals depriving such acts of their authority? How did being of Indian ancestry come to be inconsistent with Kenyanness and Ugandanness? Nationalism in East Africa is a source of deep ambiguities, even for East African Asian writers, who may generally be supportive of many of its initial aims. Peter Nazareth evinces a Fanonist disgust with the compradors who take over at independence; Jagjit Singh maintains that anti-Indian sentiments are a ruse for the ruthless imposition of new class privileges, but declines to question the class position of the Indian diaspora; Kuldip Sondhi summons irony as a defence against the rigid logic of race-thinking in post-colonial times; while Vassanji disavows the rhetoric of independence and nationalism altogether for a diasporic ideal of marginality (which I discuss in Chapter 1 of this book).

## The nation and its Others

In his essay, "What is a Nation?" Ernest Renan maintains that "Forgetting, [and even . . . ]historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation, which is why progress in historical studies often constitutes a danger for [the principle of] nationality."[22] To the extent that they are informed by the metonymic principle—the desire to reduce the flux of history to a few memorable images—nations are uneasy about memories and presences that might reveal their fractures. In national narrative, the part comes to represent the whole, thus creating gaps and silences in the nation's official history. The nation depends on the excision of memories that are excessive and which might disturb its romance, but the unspoken always returns

to haunt the national present. Such a position seems to inform the work of the Ugandan poet and playwright, Jagjit Singh, whose poem "Portrait of an Asian as an East African," first published in 1972, the year of the Ugandan Asian expulsion, gestures at the void that occupies the center of the nation's narrative.[23] The first section of the poem unearths historical truths that the new nation would rather suppress:

> for the sweat is dry
> that built the railways,
> and black blood must forget
> swamp sleeping savagery of greenness
> that burst into an indian bazaar . . .
> . . . For the blood is dry
> that roused green savagery
> from the slumber of the swamps
>
> (156–157)

At the core of this section of the poem is an understanding that the Asians have contributed—through the building of the railways—to the modernization of East Africa; not as overlords, but as indentured laborers and petty traders. Yet at independence, they are pushed aside by "the mercedes-benz politicians,/black suited, whisky voiced, swiss bank accounted" who, ironically, have no quibbles whatsoever about the pleasures of modernity (156). In this, Singh deploys an image of Asians in East Africa that continues to have resonances in more recent Asian writings of East Africa: how humble Asian pioneers of modern East Africa are vilified to become the nation's scapegoats. But in taking this long view of the problem, it would seem that Singh is downplaying the fact that it is not so much the subaltern roots of the diaspora that is the cause of tensions, but their later position as a comprador class. The "Mercedes-Benz" elite would certainly like to take over this intermediary position, but Singh simply reduces the whole of the independence movement in East Africa to the interest of that tiny class. By naming the anti-colonial movement in this way, Singh is able to dismiss it, but at the expense of the myriad interests that had a role to play in fostering this complex alliance of disparate social forces.[24] In addition, by ascribing the crisis to a failure of memory, the poem suggests that the problem is fundamentally one of consciousness and attitudes. A more fruitful approach, I argue, is one that locates the conflict in the uneven patterns of accumulation and exploitative social relations, rather than one that focuses solely on the affective responses to such historical problems.

For the persona of Singh's poem, the hostility to which the Asians are subjected, though deplorable, is nonetheless inevitable. In taking such a fatalistic stance in regard to history, the persona brings to mind Vassanji's view that helplessness on the part of the Asians of East Africa was an

inevitable response to a history that was always in other people's hands, first the colonialists, and then the African nationalists:

> . . . for someone from my background, the world did what, in fact, it had to do, and we were almost completely helpless. It made you somehow think of fate as something you had no control of. People who have commented on the novel [*No New Land*] have said it shows a hopelessness at the end—a kind of paradigmatic Indian belief in fate, but I think having been brought up in the colonies and having no control over my independence, or the policies of the government, etc., I realized all these factors determine what would happen to a person.[25]

Bearing the burden of this fatalistic logic, Singh's poem is marked by weariness, resignation in the face of apparently insurmountable odds. The best response that the persona can muster in the face of such adversity is a dose of irony, a morbid laughter at the self that masks a profound bitterness. Singh accuses the Asians of historical injustices but also tries to mount a defense of them. In the second section of the poem, he tries to imagine a future "resurrection of brown pride" ("Portrait of an Asian," 157), but soon arrives at the conclusion that the diaspora's past will inexorably result in a second exile. The best he can do is to bid farewell to his "dear beloved illusions" (158). Unable to find words and arguments that would form the basis of a strong defence of the diaspora, he resorts to the supernatural: he makes a plea to "the ancestral spirits of my race" (156, 158) and asks for a sacrifice that would "wash away the sins of history" (159). Again, Singh evinces a basically metaphysical approach to history which fails to speak squarely to the realities of the colonial past in any critical sense.

The central question that the poem asks could be summarized as follows: 'What should the nation do with its bastard histories?'[26] Singh's attempt to answer this question is undermined by the resigned tone of the poem. So impotent does the persona of the poem feel in the face of his disenfranchisement by the state that he cannot go beyond making the Shakespearean plea that "the jew also is a citizen." Shylock's famous defense is a fairly popular one in East African Asian fiction and appears in Vassanji as well.[27] Inherent in the claim that the Jew also is a citizen is an understanding that although the Asian can claim East Africa, thus far such identification is only a qualified one: "citizen? . . . perhaps so,/but of asian extraction!" (157). Like Langston Hughes's black American persona who says "I, too, sing America," the Asian diaspora's claim to the region seems a belated one, a mere addendum to the national romance.[28] But unlike Langston Hughes's defiant persona, Singh's mouthpiece cannot demand a space at the table and fails even to imagine a future resistance. The difference lies in the fact that Hughes's persona can adopt the position of moral authority that suffering provides, whereas the situation of Singh's Asian protagonists is a much more ambivalent one.

Singh's poem is informed by the view that the diaspora is an excrescence that embarrasses the nation, but without which the nation would not be able to understand itself as an entity: the Asian is the scapegoat that allows the nation, momentarily, to exorcize the conflicts that threaten to tear it apart. In an ironic mode, Singh mockingly equates the nation to an organic body, a wholesome being whose parts would hold together in perfect balance were it not for the diseased part that puts it in danger: "and we,/malignant cells,/must fade away soon" (158). This particular reference to the diaspora as a diseased appendage to the nation recalls Claude Lefort's observation that the totalitarian imaginary, geared as it is towards "the incessant production of enemies" and to the myth of the "People-as-One," represents its "others" through images of pathology.[29] In Lefort's view, the production of a unitary image of the body-politic as a body writ large is accompanied by a fervent imagining of threats presented to that body by wounds, diseases, parasites, epidemics, plagues and so on. In what is a significant refusal of this apparently totalitarian logic, Singh goes further to suggest that the whole national body is diseased, and not just the Asian part, which the indigenists would regard as the diseased excrescence: "for i, too, would have liked to think/only the toes of Africa were infected/but the cancer of colour/has gathered fresh victims now" (158).[30] This is an important insight because, as the history of East Africa shows, social and economic contradictions have persisted beyond *Uhuru* and its immediate aftermath. After the euphoria of the early 1960s, it became clear that, given the means to do so, African elites could be just as oppressive and acquisitive as their colonial predecessors. This dawning realization consisted in the insight that power had to be kept under scrutiny, regardless of who held it, if a viable post-colonial society were to emerge. It was not enough merely to end colonial rule, but to bring to a stop the asymmetry of power that had made colonial society so unjust.

Singh's poem takes an oppositional stance against the amnesia of nationalism. Yet, the persona's claim that the role of the diaspora in the making of modern East Africa has been underestimated is couched in the colonialist language of civilization. The poem comments on the Indian historical role as that of rousing East Africa from a long sleep. Embedded in Singh's attempt at resuscitating the diaspora's image is also an indication of what makes a multi-racial citizenship such a difficult possibility. Implicit in the persona's words is a view that the Indians have brought history and civility to the region. The persona's plea for tolerance is, therefore, undercut by a residual colonialism that cannot recognize itself as such. The insistence that East African pre-colonial history was a mere "slumber of the swamps" sets him off on a collision with the nationalist creed that, in a pre-colonial Africa, to cite Peter Nazareth, people "walked proudly in their lion skins like men . . . [and] lived as men in their own huts instead of as dogs outside the White man's house."[31] In spite of the fact that the persona desires to make a break with British colonial history, he seems unwilling to let go of

some of its most powerful myths. Although he wishes that his father would transcend his colonial conditioning by "fling[ing] the victoria cross/into the dung-heap of the british empire," he continues to believe that East African history begins with the Indians and the Europeans (157). The colonial legacy hangs above the persona's head as a cause of agony, yet it is so foundational to his image of himself that he cannot completely deny it. He might want to "wash away the sins of history" but he still holds on tenaciously to the idea that his ancestors were pioneers who brought civilization to the region (159). This is the dilemma that prevents Singh's persona from imagining a place for the diaspora in independent East Africa and that leads him to the conclusion that exile to the Western metropolises is the only viable option.

In his radio-play *Sweet Scum of Freedom*, Singh continues with his meditation on the plight of the Asians in post-independence East Africa.[32] First recorded by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in April 1972, four months before Idi Amin ordered the expulsion of the Ugandan Asians, this play turns its attention to questions of integration and belonging that preoccupy much of the literature from that period. It is not only a refutation of the hypocrisy of African political elites after independence, but also a critique of the positions adopted by the diaspora at this delicate historical moment.

If mutual prejudice continues to mark the relationship between "Africans" and "Asians," making post-colonial reconciliation a remote possibility, the play points towards a basic humanity that transcends the existing social divisions. Singh finds this common humanity in the primal demands of the flesh. At the center of the play is a young Asian man, Keval, who seeks the comforts of African prostitutes in a slum.[33] However, if flesh is the absolute common denominator that points to the possibility of inter-racial coexistence, the play is haunted by its recognition that the prostituted body is also symbolic of commodification and alienation within the post-colony. Paradoxically, Keval's quest for a sense of belonging is only assuaged through abjection and alienation at the margins of nation, for the figure of the black *malaya*—Swahili for "prostitute"—much derided in East African writing of the period, is his source of redemption.[34] Separated from the blacks by wealth and discourses of purity, his secret visits to the prostitutes become his links with abject national realities, as experienced by the subaltern. He soon discovers, together with the prostitutes, a common hatred for black political elites who mouth empty slogans, launch hypocritical moral crusades, and stoke up anti-Indian sentiment, while actively fleecing their subjects of their meager means of livelihood.

Singh suggests that the widespread anti-Asian sentiment in the East Africa of the play's setting is merely a form of false consciousness, which a proper education in politics would eradicate. As the play opens, we encounter an old African prostitute, Sunma, who resents her loss of customers to younger competitors. Her bitterness takes the form of a growing hatred for the Asians, and she summons common racial stereotypes: "Parasites! . . . Bastards . . . They

should all be sent packing to India" (37). For Sunma, the Asians have come to represent her suffering and debasement; as typical scapegoats, they have come to bear the full burden of the nation. It is against the background of this charged atmosphere that the play sets the stage for old Sunma's education. Her moment of recognition is brought about principally by the young prostitute Anna, who compels her to look at the situation once again, with an apparently less-jaundiced eye.

The first major question in the exchange between Anna and Sunma is that of social integration between the Asians and the Africans. For Sunma, the Asians are reprehensible because of what she considers as their wilful isolation from the local people, a seclusion whose hypocritical nature she casts into sharp relief by pointing at the secret relations between Asian men and African prostitutes. The play, however, tries to undermine what it projects as Sunma's singular obsession with race by drawing attention to other facets of social conflict, as the exchange below shows:

> *ANNA*: I like them. I like Asians. Look at our African ministers. Always drinking and dancing at Lorina with malayas. Freedom or no freedom we're the same old malayas always. But at least we do business with the Asians.
> *SUNMA*: Rubbish. (*Imitating her*) We do business with the Asians… Rubbish! Why don't they marry you then? Huh? Parasites!
> *ANNA*: Why don't your ministers marry you? (*Sweet Scum of Freedom*, 37)

Against the nationalist claim that the Asians have frustrated the national romance by refusing to integrate with the Africans, Anna recognizes that the nation is fractured on several fronts, and not on race alone. This fracturing of the apparently seamless nation is seen in the shabby way the *malayas* are treated, and also in the handling of the former freedom fighters by the new government. Those who fought the "Wazungu"—the European colonizers—in a bid for land and freedom are now suppressed because "Wazungu is still using the land" (50). If the official nationalist rhetoric is a stridently anti-colonial one—with the ritualistic expression of solidarity with the anti-colonial struggles in Rhodesia, Angola, Mozambique, and South Africa—the actual conduct of the new state is decisively neocolonial. The Asians function within this rhetoric as surrogates for the whole colonial, capitalist machine, while exploitation continues in many other forms.[35]

Writing in the late sixties when newly independent African nations had begun to fracture in alarming ways, Wole Soyinka observed that:

> given equal opportunity, the black tin god… would degrade and dehumanize his victim as capably as Vorster or Governor Wallace… We, whose humanity the poets celebrated before the proof, whose lyric innocence was daily questioned by the very pages of the newspapers, are now being

> forced by disaster, not foresight, to a reconsideration of our relationship to the outside world.[36]

Faced by the rapid sundering of the loose anti-colonial alliances, many writers were forced to reconsider the earlier idealization of the African personality. About the same time that Soyinka wrote these lines, the Ugandan writer Okot p'Bitek decried "a growing tendency in Africa for people to believe that most of their ills are imported, that the real sources of our problems come from outside." This belief, according to p'Bitek, was accompanied by the contradictory belief that "the solutions to our social ills can be imported."[37] Both p'Bitek and Soyinka identified in the willingness to downplay African historical agency a perverse dependence on the very others who were criticized for creating the African crisis. It is within this early critique of dependency that the nationalist scapegoating of Asians in *Sweet Scum of Freedom* can be understood.

In a manner that recalls the naming of the Asians as a "cancer" in "Portrait of An Asian as an East African," Dr Mosozi Ebongo—who presides over the incongruously large Ministry of Commerce and Trade, Broadcasting, Foreign and Cultural Affairs—deploys the language of hygiene in condemning the prostitutes:

> NEWSREADER: Dr Ebongo also launched a passionate attack on prostitution in Parliament today. Referring to them as the scum that is today disgracing the heroic freedom struggle of our people, he went on to quote the thoughts of Chairman Mao on the best ways of wiping out this disgraceful disease. (44)

Singh suggests quite powerfully that the marginalization of the Asians has its twin in the maltreatment of the prostitutes, and that the nation should not lurch onto scapegoats as explanations for its myriad contradictions. Beneath the myth of the nation-as-one, and the consequent naming of prostitutes and Asians as blemishes, Singh sees an attempt to mask the struggles that persist as the new national elites consolidate their power.

Although Singh's resolution to the race question seems overdone at times, especially the alliance between the prostitutes and Keval, his view that anti-Asian discourse can be a diversion from the truths of the nation is nonetheless quite compelling. These truths can be seen in the plight of the *malayas*, which has not changed with the coming of independence and the replacement of the colonial state with a repressive elite that thrives on inequality. Instead of a painstaking attention to the task of eliminating "poverty, disease and hunger," its self-declared mission, the leadership of this unnamed country prefers to moralize about the existing social conditions, and to imagine external causes to problems experienced by local people (45). In cases where such external culprits cannot immediately be established,

extraneous agents of crisis are identified within the nation itself. It is this logic that informs Dr Ebongo's crusade against "[women] of low character" (38) and the Asians, both of whom he regards as "the scum that has disgraced our heroic freedom struggle" (51). The underlying reality, though, is that he has been frequenting the very night clubs where the prostitutes gather, and extorting money from Asian traders in the name of "African Socialism" (40). He might indeed be the "scum of freedom," suggesting a double-entendre at the heart of the play's title. This doubling is central to Singh's ironical approach to the question of independence, an irony that was soon to be visited on Ugandans in a particularly vicious way by the regime of General Idi Amin. If to create a people—"Africans"—means creating an Other to "the people," then the Indians of Uganda had become in the eyes of indigenists a blemish that would have to be removed. But once the Indians were nudged out by Amin, new enemies arose, this time from within the nation. If we are to pursue Lefort's metaphor of the nation-as-body, the nation's persecution of its Other in a perverted ritual of decolonization had finally become a masochistic maiming of its own self. Persecuting the Asians is simply a prelude to the oppression of those who were supposedly being spoken for by the indigenist elite.

In spite of its provocativeness Singh's twinning of the interests of the Asian commercial class and the prostitutes is problematic. The insistence on the universality of human experience, which the twinning suggests, can also be read as an evasion rather than a candid confrontation with the divisive politics of race. This evasion is typical of the kind of liberalism to which Singh subscribes. Within this scheme, universality, achieved in this instance through inter-racial sex, becomes a cover for the contradictions entrenched in society, and conflict is explained away as being the result of mere misunderstanding. It seems that Singh introduces the question of class, not to explore its complex intersections with the discourse of race, but so that he can neutralize any attempts to take race seriously. For if the problem is not of race but class—embodied in Anna's statement that "All the rich people is the same" (41)—then the play should have taken a more critical view of class formation more generally. Class, it seems, is only important to Singh to the extent that it deflects attention from other facets of conflict; beyond that, he does not treat it as a theme warranting much exploration. The play's disapprobation of the exploitative tendencies of the rich is directed specifically at Dr Ebongo, the most notable representative of the African political elite, who then acts as a scapegoat for a much more pervasive social reality. Singh is keen on presenting the reader with an equivalence of immorality, and the universality of greed. However, the ubiquity of a problem—as embodied in Charles Sarvan's argument that economic exploitation is a function of "human nature"—does not necessarily make such a problem any more tolerable or even less burdensome.[38] The insistence on a universal inhumanity may enable Singh to highlight areas of shared human experience

that particularistic discourses of nationhood might ignore, but this positive assertion of commonality in turn occludes real differences in society. This masking of deep-seated social contradictions is best seen in Singh's portrayal of Anna. Though poor and burdened by her two babies, sired by Ramgolam the shopkeeper, Anna shows a surprising degree of cheerfulness in her interaction with Keval throughout the play. It is never suggested that her cheerfulness is a mere appearance, carefully cultivated to attract customers; rather, the impression Singh creates is that Anna is truly happy with her lot. Together with Keval, she represents what Singh would regard as the ideal nation, but it is an ideal nation that is characterized by stark inequalities, a nation in which people know their places. On the other end of the scale is Sunma, the old prostitute who is discontent with her situation, and who is represented as an Asian-hater. Although her anti-Asian stance is simplistic and mirrors the crude chauvinism of Dr Ebongo, the play's vision of a racially harmonious society undercuts her anger at social injustice.

Given the repressive nature of the post-colonial state, Keval chooses to leave for England to continue his studies. Several times, he has tried to secure admission into the more lucrative disciplines like commerce, law or medicine at the local university, but has been barred by a rule that gives "[f]irst preference to Africans because Asians are parasites. Parasites will only be allowed to do B.A. in history or English" (42). The bureaucratic rituals that the Asians have to undergo in order to remain in the country are of Kafkaesque proportions. On the one hand, the state demands of the Asians that they "integrate" by registering as citizens, but on the other hand, such attempts at securing citizenship are openly frustrated. As in "Portrait of an Asian as an East African," the resolution to the crisis is flight. As the play ends, there is a sound of aircraft engines as Keval leaves for England. It is at this very moment of Keval's departure that the play's attempts to imagine an alliance between the Asians and the African subaltern is finally undermined, for as the plane leaves there is the sound of the police knocking on Anna's door. Keval may have shared a lot with the prostitutes, but their circumstances are widely different; he has the resources to begin a life somewhere else whereas they remain behind to be terrorized by the police. The primary victims of the post-colonial regime are the prostitutes, occupying as they do the lowest place on the gender and class scale. Keval may indeed feel an affinity for them, and for other dispossessed people, but he remains shielded from many of the indignities that they continue to face. Given the wide gulf between him and the subaltern, his views about their plight are mainly those of a spectator.

In spite of these problems, *Sweet Scum of Freedom* captures vividly the obscene exercise of power in a newly independent African country, in ways that are echoed several times in African writing of the time. Singh presents the social order ushered in by independence as an absurd, lethal comedy, in

which the impulse to laughter is only disturbed by the sheer commitment on the part of the political elites to their own falsehoods. This theme of the gulf between rhetoric and reality can also be seen in Peter Nazareth's *In a Brown Mantle*.

I end this chapter with a brief reading of "Undesignated," a radio-play published in 1968 by the Kenyan playwright, Kuldip Sondhi.[39] The setting of the play is Kenya, and the time is just after the attainment of independence. The main source of conflict in the drama is the preferential treatment extended to black employees in the spirit of "Africanization" in the early years of Kenyan independence. The title "Undesignated" refers to the practice where people from racial groups that experienced the most extreme forms of colonial discrimination would be "designated" for preferential treatment through official policy. The story revolves around Prem Guru, a middle-aged man of Asian origin who is an experienced engineer, Solomon Ohanga, a young African engineer who is also an accomplished artist, and Majid, an assertive young man, also of Asian origin, who is resentful of what he sees as the maltreatment of the Asians. Finally, there is June Mwendwa, Solomon's girlfriend, who tries to persuade him to give up a civil service career for an honorable but poverty-stricken vocation as an artist. At the beginning, all the characters assume that Solomon Ohanga is going to be promoted to become General Manager to the exclusion of Prem, who is much more experienced. Prem is chided by his wife for not standing up for his rights. Majid, obviously angered at the racialism such a decision would imply, takes every opportunity to snipe at Solomon and the rest of the "Mercedes brigade"—the infamous black middle classes who, in the context of the play, are derided by conservatives and radicals alike. He says sarcastically: "The real genius in Kenya is the educated black man. By virtue of his colour and education he can secure any top job he wants. In fact there aren't enough available jobs that need them" (29). Not content with the ending that most of the characters and race-conditioned audiences expect, Sondhi springs a surprise. Neither Prem nor Solomon secures the job. The new General Manager becomes Dennis Githari, a not-so-educated but experienced African man whom the workers in the ministry respect, but whose presence has been subdued throughout earlier parts of the play. Irony wins over the certainties of racial thinking.

Sondhi's play, in an urbane and expansive style, characteristic of his brand of liberalism, deals with the residual attitudes that attend social and political transitions in independent African countries trying to reinvent themselves. The play is a powerful attempt to transcend the limits of racial discourse, but this attempt at transcendence does not mean a mere evasion of the problems that ignited the particular dramatic conflict in the first place. There is an understanding in Sondhi's play that the stereotypes that bedevil members of all racial groups, and even those stereotypes that seek to undermine nationalist attempts to create real change, are to be confronted if a break

is to be made with the past. Majid's postures of Indian victimhood are as much the object of irony as the indigenist stance that the contribution of Asian professionals to national life should be disparaged. Sondhi does not enter a conspiracy with any section of his readership as Vassanji's narrator in *The Gunny Sack*; rather, every possible assumption is brought to question, except the idea that the prevailing climate of racial hostility is injurious to all. This presentation of the race problem as everyone's burden is refreshing in its reminder that anti-colonial nationalist politics were often informed by a cosmopolitan spirit. At the heart of Sondhi's dramatic plea for the necessity of racial rapprochement in post-colonial society is a humanism that was characteristic of nationalist attempts to create country-wide, and even continent-wide, senses of community that would both recognize ethnic specificity but also minimize its centrality in public life. Whenever the mantra of nationalism-as-parochialism is repeated, Sondhi serves as a reminder that utopian cosmopolitanism was an integral part of the nationalist discourse on decolonization, even if popular hopes for change were soon dashed.

Most East African Asian writers deploy irony in their treatment of the theme of decolonization. Pushed against the wall by the aggressive political opportunism of post-colonial elite, some of the writers set themselves the task of stripping away the masks of nationalism. For Peter Nazareth's narrator in *In a Brown Mantle*:

> Many of them [nationalist elites] were merely opportunists on the make, without a single ideal but with one asset: the colour of their skin. Black meant Exploited. Our politicians declaimed about 'shedding our blood for the motherland,' 'laying down our lives for freedom,' 'sacrifices,' and so on, but these were only words, whereas words elsewhere represented a brutal reality. Our Independence was mainly a revolution one shouted and drank one's way into.
>
> (*In A Brown Mantle*, 49)

Like many other writers of the post-colonial period, East African Asian writers are very much aware of the gap between nationalist rhetoric and political practice. Although they use words as tools for challenging the new states, they also recognize that this is a tool that politicians themselves are very adept at using. Since the writer meets the politician on the terrain of words, it is necessary for writers to be suspicious of words. It is for this reason that the writers considered in this book tend to write the nation in an ironic mode, calling attention to the fictionality of their works and undermining the claims of their characters, narrators and personas, a subject which is explored in greater depth in the next chapter.

# 8
# Memory, Metafiction and Modernity

An acute consciousness of, and concern about, the past and its possible recovery in memory pervades the work of Moyez Vassanji, with his narratives "probing into the past to account for a present that is increasingly chaotic," but also reaching out from the present to make sense of a past whose nature in narrative is under continual formation.[1] The burdens under whose weight the writing labors are the troubled milieux of colonial and post-colonial modernity, both of which are marked by powerful metanarratives of history.[2] Since Vassanji attempts a recuperation of the past to provide new ways of seeing the Indian diaspora of East Africa, his narratives are positioned against versions of the past in these inherited categories of history. This act of revision is propelled by, among others, what he seems to regard as the congealing of the diaspora's history by colonial and anti-colonial discourses in ways that are inimical to the Indian diaspora. His fiction acknowledges the importance of a continuous conversation between past and present, as a way of challenging the kind of reification of history alluded to above. Vassanji invokes the past to provide foundational narratives from whose vantage point the diasporic subject of his fiction can rise above the seeming muddle of the present. Nonetheless, the past depicted in these writings is not merely a stable contrast to cultural fragmentation in the present, delving as he does into the problem of writing history and the vexed nature of memory itself. In a sense, therefore, he both disavows and recognizes the importance of remembering. As he indicates in one of his interviews, there is a case "both for and against digging up [the] past."[3]

Vassanji's fiction occupies a unique place in East African writing for it self-consciously reflects upon the nature of history both as an immanent category and as a textual process. This is not to suggest that other writers from the region have not written literature with historical themes, but that very few of them have come to write in the mode known as metafiction, which Patricia Waugh names as "fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality."[4] Charles

Sarvan has noted that *The Gunny Sack* "implicitly questions the validity and value of what it records and therefore, itself" (511), a self-reflexivity that is also evident in Vassanji's other texts.[5] Vassanji's fiction generally takes an oppositional stance to the idea that it is possible to write a correct history, hence opening up the field to what he considers a necessary scepticism about truth-claims and openness to the various possible ways of imagining history.

It is this see-saw movement between the affirmation of memory and its disavowal that this chapter examines, in order to explain the motives behind it and the consequences that it holds for Vassanji's politics. Through a reading of *The Book of Secrets* and *The Gunny Sack*, I argue that, much as memory is a necessity for Vassanji and his Shamsi subjects, its value remains a highly contradictory one. On the one hand, the feeling of exile engendered by migrancy, colonialism and a hostile African nationalism provides the impetus for memory as an act of self-restitution. On the other hand, the recollection of unflattering moments in history, such as the involvement of the Indian diaspora in the slave trade and colonialism, makes memory a burden and thus frustrates the attempt at the establishment of foundational narratives. Faced with this riddle, Vassanji does not jettison historical referents altogether, but chooses instead a mode of narration that can lighten the weight of history while also making use of it. This consists in a careful balancing act between memory and its refutation, the result of which are texts that are both historical and apparently anti-historical. I wish to argue that Vassanji's narratives embrace history because it is the site upon which diasporic desires can be realized, but also question it because it is already half another's and thus shot through with meanings that frustrate the self's desires. Moreover, much as this ironical relation to the past allows Vassanji to arrive at insights that a single-minded view of history might have repressed, I show that it also postpones many of the ethical questions that his works would otherwise have given a more salient treatment.

This chapter shows how Vassanji summons the plurality of memory, which consists in giving space to a myriad of voices, as a defence against the freezing of the past by any metanarratives. In essence, the central target in Vassanji's deconstruction of history is the notion of totality, the attempt to grasp and explain history in one clean sweep as a single whole. However, all acts of memory are also acts of reduction and, ultimately, selection. Louis Mink, for instance, has argued that memory is a way of "grasping together in a single mental act things that are not experienced together, or even capable of being so experienced, because they are separated by time, space or logical kind. And the ability to do this is a necessary (although not a sufficient) condition of *understanding*."[6] What this means is that memory, however tentative and disordered, is always marked by an effort to grasp totality, to reduce the flux of history to a series of finite statements. It is an attempt to give coherence to events and occurences that might not at first seem to

have a logical connection. With this insight in mind, I provide a critique which suggests that Vassanji's equivocal narration of the past does not completely eliminate the idea of totality in his novels but merely masks it. It is this process of masking that readers need to lay bare in order to attain a keener appreciation of the politics that underpin Vassanji's narrative.

Memory-work in Vassanji's novels is conducted in the context of a "brave new world" of continuous transformation in which "All that is solid melts into air."[7] In this modern world in which the future threatens to overtake the present, the pursuit of colonial values by Vassanji's diasporic subjects means that memory and tradition are repressed. Although one of the common stereotypes about the Indian communities of East Africa is that they remained resolutely impervious to colonial culture, Vassanji has commented, contrary to this perception, that discourses of empire carried a lot of weight among them: "In my generation the schooling was entirely in English and there was a very strong tendency to look down upon the Indian connection. This was a colonial mentality. So even the teachers who came from India and had an Indian accent were laughed at."[8] This fact of mental colonization in the name of progress would explain, in part, why Vassanji's fiction takes a fairly dim view of what Simon Gikandi calls "modernity and its universal categories of history, reason, and the human subject."[9] It is only by negating modernity that the memories and traditions it represses may be resuscitated.

In order to enact a narrative refutation of modernity, Vassanji has enlisted, among others, textual strategies that have developed within the high modernist and the postmodernist critique of modernity. These strategies include the following: an insistence on the provisionality of statements about history; a challenge to the notion of referentiality; a pervasive ironizing and relativization of truth-claims; an intertextuality that draws attention to the nature of fiction and history as artifice; a recognition of the inevitability of interpretation in narrative; setting up and then blurring the distinction between fiction/myth on the one hand and history on the other; a paradoxical installation of a totalizing order and its subsequent deconstruction; an embrace of plurality and heterogeneity as opposed to narrative closure; a rejection of linearity and teleology in the unfolding of narrative, and many other related strategies.[10] The loose epistemological framing of narration and the provisional ontology that arises from the adoption of these strategies allows for the profusion of voices that would otherwise have remained repressed. Yet the ecumenical nature of this gesture remains the source of an important disquiet: If a narrative contains so many antinomies, if it is at once a thesis and its radical negation, then what is it not? How does the reader contradict a narrative that already contains contradiction within itself? Since Vassanji is from a place, his adoption of the ironic mode of historiographic metafiction skims over some of the difficult questions that his own position suggests.

The problem of the relationship between fiction and history on the one hand and ethical considerations on the other, has been at the center of several debates within East Africa, the most famous of which concerns the Mau Mau insurgency that took place in Kenya in the early 1950s. During the 1970s and 1980s, especially, the insurgency was a site of intense controversy, with some of the contestants making assumptions about the transparence of its history and also claiming privileged access to the truth of the matter.[11] These "wars of the intellectuals," as Carol Sicherman calls them,[12] were defined by the political "subjectivism" of the participants, and also technical disagreements about historiographical method, which often masked hardened ideological positions.[13] The squabbles pitted "radical" literary scholars and historians against "bourgeois" "guild historians," some of whom bemoaned what they considered an encroachment by writers of creative literature—"fiction"—into what was otherwise the domain of the historian proper: the cold "facts" of history.[14] Having assailed the "bourgeois" historians for suppressing Kenya's popular history, the novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o was in turn at the receiving end of the charge that, by "blur[ring] the lines between history and literature," he was involved in an ideologically interested muddling of the country's true history.[15] Implicit in this debate was a deep-seated faith in positivist, modernist notions about the transparence of history. One of the antagonists in this debate, the historian William Ochieng, charged Ngugi for peddling "myth," "rumor" and "tribal gossip" in the place of a rigorous pursuit of knowledge.[16] For Ochieng, Ngugi's reliance on myth was a contemptible appropriation of history as "a propaganda instrument in the service of a chosen ideology."[17] Ngugi and his compatriots, however, seemed to be informed by the sense that it was precisely the popular elements of their sources, myth and rumor, that lent authority and legitimacy to their versions of history, especially against the background of the subjugation by the colonial and post-colonial state of popular, experiential knowledges. In this clamor to be heard, which Atieno Odhiambo aptly named a "search of power," certain key tenets of history were elided.[18]

Writing at an earlier moment in the unfolding of this now-famous debate, N. Gatheru Wanjohi had argued that "historical information . . . is not the same thing as history, which may be viewed as a subjective organization and interpretation of man's past activities, undertaken with a view to lend them rationality."[19] For Wanjohi, therefore, interpretive acts were at the center of all historical narrative, a position at variance with Ochieng's view that only "radical" scholars such as Ngugi were steeped in ideology and propaganda. Although he acknowledged the shortcomings of historical narrative—owing to the tampering with (and distortion of) data at the moment of transmission, the paucity of information and the ideological stances of the historian—Wanjohi nonetheless suggested that these could be balanced out through self-reflexive research practices. He provided a way out of the

interpretive bind by calling on researchers to make "honest declaration[s of their] theoretical bas[es]," in order that they would achieve "objectivity."[20] Although his choice of the term "objectivity" may seem anachronistic from the point of view of postmodern anxieties about categories such as reason and history, his equivocal usage of the term signaled an openness to doubt: a recognition that it is not possible to say the last word about any moment of history. However, this intrinsic open-endedness of history did not imply relativism, or an endless play of signs, for Wanjohi also insisted on the necessity of "commitment" to ethical causes, in his case the pursuit of a decolonizing historiography.[21] He understood history-writing as an act of will, a dedicatedness to particular subjective pursuits, but also insisted that the historian needed to provide a good account of his or her ethical position. Although this approach to the question of history is informative, and is taken into account in this reading of Vassanji's treatment of history, it does not provide sufficient room for a rigorous critique of historiographical practice.

As James Ogude argues, it is not enough to state the ethical, or indeed ideological, causes underpinning a particular interpretation of history:

> . . . no interpretation is value free and, indeed, there can never be one interpretation of an historical subject. This does not mean, however, that every interpretation is adequate once the politics behind it are established; one needs to explore the possibilities and limits a given interpretation or framework offers in exploring complex layers of knowledge.[22]

Approaching both literary and historical texts in the way Ogude suggests is crucial for two reasons. Firstly, it allows the reader to exceed a simplistic relativism in which every truth-claim is accorded a status equivalent to all other such claims. To confess that one's view of history is partisan, and inherently limited, can very easily become a mask for the contradictions in one's hermeneutic practice, with the confession preempting, and effectively holding back, any attempts to conduct a systematic critique. The mere concession that one is partisan, although apparently innocuous, can be a powerful pretext for silencing any investigation into the precise nature of one's interpretation of the past. The argument here is that self-reflexive texts which, in acts of irony, attempt to stand outside themselves do, by stealth, extend to themselves "grace:" an automatic concealment from the critical gaze.[23] The critic's task, therefore, is to read against the grain of such a text, to elucidate its conditions of possibility, to weigh it against other texts, and thus to return it to its context. Secondly, the approach demands that ethical declarations be taken with a degree of scepticism, a useful note of caution in a post-colonial context in which many political and ethical projects have ended in disillusionment because their foundation in knowledge has not been thoroughly thought out in the first instance. The point here is not that

statements of ethics should be jettisoned, but that they need at least to be subjected to scrutiny.

But what exactly does it mean to read a work of historical fiction "in context?" Doesn't it mean a return to the notion that history, understood as the provider of a context, is "literature's source and its ultimate referent"?[24] This is a question that often weighs down upon attempts to interrogate the historicity and sociality of literary texts, with certain critics expressing concern over the possible loss of literature's autonomy. Yet all too often, there is little clarity as to the meaning(s) of the term "history," its cognate terms—"historiography" and "historicity"—and their relation to literature. In its broadest sense, history refers to "change over time," as embodied in happenings and events that compel attention.[25] Then there is history as the intellectual act through which meaning is given to such events and happenings—in their emplotment and narrativization. The latter involves the selection and foregrounding of information from the past, and has a fictive dimension—of telling a story and giving a plot to an otherwise chaotic plurality of events. In this, the use of common strategies of emplotment, the dividing line between history and literature is very thin. Seen this way, literature is neither completely autonomous from nor surbodinate to history as an adjacent zone of knowledge. Nonetheless, history and literature work through institutional and disciplinary frameworks which, although different from one another, lead to some knowledge about the past. This means that it is possible to glean "history" and "context" from within a literary text itself. This is, perhaps, what J. M. Coetzee had in mind when he raised alarm over "the colonisation of the [South African] novel by the discourse of history" and claimed a preference for historical fiction that recreates the past "on its own terms."[26] Such a position is enabling, especially if it is not seen as a licence to escape from social questions, but as an invocation against taking a pre-existent edifice of "history" as the only way to meaningfully engage with a society's past and, indeed, its present. Seen this way, the call not to subordinate literature to formal *historiography* does not become a pretext for evacuating literature from the scene of *history* altogether, for, in spite of its relative autonomy, literature does not occupy a pure, rarefied domain outside of its intrinsic "worldliness," its location in society. Even in the event that it does not have a recognizable historical referent, literature remains steeped in social processes, hence its undubitable *historicity*. In a sense, George Lukacs' suggestion that the name "the historical novel" is a tautology is therefore of some relevance here.[27] While it might be necessary to avoid an easy slippage between the terms "history" and "historicity," recognition of their overlap is nonetheless useful in guarding against the conception of history and literature as discrete forms of knowledge separate from all others. Moreover, it is always important to bear in mind that, while many literary practitioners may decry the incursion of history into literature, there are perhaps an equal number of historians who stridently

oppose what they see as the invasion of the discipline by literary and cultural theory.[28] The point here is that both literature and history have been opened up to the whole ensemble of humanist disciplines, which thus act as part of their context: the background against which their value is weighed. For the purposes of this chapter, Vassanji's context thus includes the whole ensemble of knowledges surrounding his fiction, but also the very scenes of history that his fiction provides. In a sense, therefore, Vassanji texts can be read not only in relation to their own internal logic but also in relation to the ways in which they relate to knowledges extrinsic to themselves.

## *The Gunny Sack*: Casting spells against death

In Vassanji's first novel *The Gunny Sack*, the autobiographical narrator, Salim, embarks upon a process of uncovering his personal genealogy and the history of his community, the Shamsi. The impulse for this decision to write this history is the death and burial of his grand-aunt, Ji Bai, in the freezing conditions of an approaching North American winter. Her demise marks the end of an important era in the unfolding of the family history. However, any fears that this enormously rich past, much of which precedes Salim's birth, might have died with Ji Bai are immediately dispelled when we learn that she has bequeathed to him a gunny sack that contains mementoes from the family's past. These bits and fragments later provide the raw material for Salim's reconstruction of the Shamsi past, which begins with the migration to East Africa by his great-grandfather (Dhanji Govindji) in the late nineteenth century and ends with Salim's own exile in North America, four generations later. He anthropomorphizes the gunny sack and gives it the name Sherbanoo (or Shehru for short) after Schehrazade, the narrator of *The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night*, also popularly known as *The Arabian Nights*. It needs to be recalled here that Schehrazade of *The Arabian Nights* is a slave-woman who, condemned to death by a tyrannical monarch, creatively postpones her execution by telling fantastic tales at the monarch's court every evening. Similarly, Shehrbanoo of *The Gunny Sack* furnishes raw material for Salim's narrative as a way of protecting itself from "death," which violently occurs at the end of the novel: "She lies on the floor, crumpled, her throat cut, guts spilled, blood on the floor" (268). In addition, she provides a counter to the powerful tendency within the Shamsi community to block any attempts to unearth shameful moments from the past, reflected at the beginning of the novel when some members of Salim's extended family express a wish "to bury the past" (5). Nonetheless, the expectation that the narrative will create an antidote to these powerful agents of amnesia is undermined by the fragmented historical information that the gunny offers. At the very moment that it prescribes memory as a weapon against social death—represented by the generations of those "who closed their ears when old men and women spoke" (134)—*The Gunny Sack*

also alerts the reader to the impossibility of providing a wholesome narrative about the past. Why does Vassanji take such an equivocal stance about memory at a point when powerful narratives of the past seem especially necessary? Why does Shehrbanoo concede to her own death when she has made such a powerful case against forgetting? Why does Vassanji script a self-deprecating narrative that intertwines with a rich and variegated communal saga spanning a whole century? What does it mean to disclaim history at the very moment when it is actively being produced? These are some of the questions that this section of the chapter addresses, in the process of a broader interrogation of Vassanji's representation of history.

Clearly, one of Vassanji's anxieties in *The Gunny Sack* is about writing a self-assured historical romance that would deny a place for counter-narratives within its overall scheme. He therefore scripts a story that provides the conditions for, and launches into, its own critique. One of the most crucial of the devices that he deploys in an attempt to fulfill this task is by adopting a non-linear narrative structure. In an interview with Chelva Kanaganayakam, he indicates that his disjointed structuring of the novel was deliberate: "I did not see, nor wanted to give the impression of, a simple, linear, historical truth emerging. Not all the mysteries of the past are resolved in the book. That is deliberate. It's the only way."[29] In keeping with this scheme, the narrative begins at the end, a few weeks after Ji Bai's funeral. From the "grim basement" (66) of a North American hotel, Salim begins to recount the establishment and eventual departure of the Shamsi community from East Africa. Beginning the narrative at the end is significant because it draws attention to the fact that the history enacted in the novel is the product of a "past–present" relation, rather than an immanent category beyond the refractions of its narration.[30] Salim's narrative moves back and forth between disparate time-periods, creating a web-like structure that complicates what would otherwise have been a straightforward, chronological narrative. The main thrust of the novel is interspersed with interludes in which Salim reflects upon the story he is telling.

Although the narrative begins with what, at first, seems to be a "modernist obsession with origins," this is undermined by Salim's eventual realization that his genealogy is too complicated to fit into such a tight frame.[31] For instance, in the very first chapter in which he attempts to establish the "beginning" of the Shamsi saga in India, he makes a detour by telling the reader about his English teacher from the Dar es Salaam days, Miss Penny Mrs Gaunt,[32] whom he addresses thus: "Every time I think of you, I search for the beginning, every time I utter 'beginning' I recall you, Madam" (7). It is only after this diversion that he begins to tell how the Shamsi converted to Islam from Hinduism in India, and how they eventually ended up in East Africa. This particular interjection in the narrative is crucial, for it calls attention to the untidy, syncretic nature of Shamsi history: the fact that Shamsi subjects are the product of several intermingling histories. Since

Salim declines to privilege India as the site of absolute origin, the English school-mistress is therefore as much a part of his "beginning" as the bearded old man who establishes the Shamsi sect. Salim finds it increasingly impossible as the narrative proceeds to claim any one moment as the indisputable source of his being; in fact, many of the memories he associates with his beginnings can quite properly be read as continuations. All he can provide in the face of the chaotic detail from the past are splinters and isolated strands, which he manages, through sheer will, to suture as he shapes the novel's narrative.

However, the competing versions of the past mentioned above do not have syncretism as the sole premise for their foregrounding in the narrative. Even more importantly, they indicate, as I have indicated, Vassanji's acute investment in the language of doubt that informs much of contemporary culture and postmodernism in particular. Peter Simatei, for instance, has argued persuasively that Vassanji's novels be read as examples of what Linda Hutcheon calls "historiographic metafiction," one of the key categories in postmodern fiction.[33] This reading of the novels is, in my view, legitimate, given that Vassanji has clearly been influenced by these powerful literary currents that pervade the Western metropolises. I want to suggest, however, that any traits that approximate those of historiographic metafiction in *The Gunny Sack* should also be read with keen attention to some of the more immediate historical circumstances that form the backgound to Vassanji's work. Doing this would mean seeing his doubts, not just as emblems of the general human condition in the late twentieth century, but also as the product of specific historical conjuctures ("alternative" or "multiple" modernities) that need to be taken seriously as important variations on, if not complete breaks from, the general theme of metropolitan modernity and its aftermath.[34] In the case of *The Gunny Sack*, and in his other works as well, the key to understanding Vassanji's angst is the fact of his community's migration to the turbulent world of colonial East Africa and the traumatic (for the Indian diaspora) ending of the British Empire. Although it might indeed be the case that this angst is the result of an increasing awareness by Vassanji of the difficulties of asserting unified cultural subjectivities, a condition that afflicts the contemporary world more generally, it seems that a more precise explanation could be the collapse of the instruments of power that had underwritten the life of the Indian diaspora in colonial East Africa. This is not to suggest the diaspora faced no difficulties and contradictions during the colonial period; rather, it is to underscore the processes through which those contradictions are normalized from the vantage-point of the post-colonial present, and how colonialism then comes to be construed as Edenic. Such a task of revealing the cracks in history is necessary if a new consciousness of self and history is to emerge. The earlier parts of *The Gunny Sack*, for instance, provide informative accounts about how easily and casually the Indian trading community at Matamu changes its allegiance from

the German to the British colonial government at the end of the First World War, a scenario that the narrator uses to underscore the immigrants' disregard for governments and for notions of stability. The novel also details the humiliations members of the Indian community faced at the hands of colonial authorities, thus providing even more justification for the diaspora's distrust of the centralized power of the state. And yet, in spite of the many instances of colonial fragmentation and trouble, the overall impression created by Vassanji's fiction is deep melancholy at the passing of the British Empire. The argument I am advancing here is that Vassanji's "postmodernity," if at all, is not merely of the kind spurred on by the more well-known Western disenchantment with modernity,[35] but one that is also informed by the collapse of one of the twentieth century's greatest instrumentalities of power: the colonial state and its attendant claims to knowledge. It is against the background of this implosion of the colonial world with its many (un)certainties that I would like to consider Vassanji's fragmented histories, with due cognizance to their uniqueness. The argument can indeed be made, in a way that exceeds a mere fascination with irony, that the Indian diaspora in East Africa, to the extent that they did so, tolerated colonialism because it had become familiar and comforting with the passage of time. The point here is that the colonial state, with its relatively rigid social structures, offered the diaspora a sense of stability, which the post-colonial state, with its attempts at social change, could barely match.

Located at the intersections of several versions of history, *The Gunny Sack* resists the imposition of a single vision of history. If colonialism's singular vision of history produced a colonized subject who yearns for England, African nationalism, with its single-minded desire to dissolve the contradictions of colonial culture has prompted a "second exile" for both the writer and his narrator into another plane of tribulation: the similarly difficult contexts of North America. In order to exceed the eschatological narrative of African nationalism and the linear historical vision of colonialism, *The Gunny Sack*, like Vassanji's other novels, celebrates its own fragmented and open-ended histories, and calls attention to the inventedness of its memories:[36]

> Memory, Ji Bai would say, is this old sack here, this poor dear that nobody has any use for any more. Stroking the sagging brown shape with affection she would drag it closer, to sit at her feet like a favourite child. In would plunge her hand through the gaping hole of a mouth, and she would rummage inside. *Now you feel this thing here, you fondle that one, you bring out this naughty little nut and everything else in it rearranges itself.*
>
> (3; my emphasis)

It might occur to the reader that even at the very moment that Salim invokes the past as a homely recourse, he also hints at its open-endedness,

undermining the idea that it is a *fait accompli* and thus profoundly politicizing the art of history. The passage hails the reader as an active agent of memory, hence the repetitive appeal to the "you," the reader. Keen readers may also observe that Salim explores the idea of time as an artifice, but one that is at the foundation of humanity itself: the metaphorical order that subjects impose on their universe.

At the beginning of Chapter 11 in which Salim reflects upon his childhood and the way he was interpellated into a modern colonial subjectivity, the novel once again turns to the modern technologies of time and the pitfalls of a rigid, linear temporalization:

> Wisps of memory. Cotton balls gliding from the gunny sack, each a window to the world . . . Asynchronous images projected on multiple cinema screens . . . Time here is not the continuous coordinate of Mr Kabir (who knew all the theorems by heart and could tell you the page numbers in the maths book on which you could find them) but a collection of blots [. . .] here you number your own blots and there is no end to them and each lies in wait for you like a black hole from which you could never return. (112)

It is instructive that the passage draws the reader's attention to memory not only as a site of competing versions (as in the case of the multiple cinema screens) but also as a process that renders invalid any pretense at truth. The image of the blot and the black hole, as Vassanji deploys it, is an apposite one for memory in at least three senses. First, it suggests that each mnemonic lead, each trace from the past, can be interpreted in an infinite number of ways. Second, it points to the unyielding nature of the past; the idea that its immanence is irrecoverable. Third, it suggests that the recovery of the past is a risky exercise. However, the elusiveness of the past is not necessarily a negative attribute, for the old must give way for the new, in a Promethean death–life cycle.[37] It is only because the past recedes into oblivion that change is able to take place. As Richard Terdiman observes in *Discourse/Counter-Discourse*, "there is no process of institution in social life without a preceding destitution."[38] This logic would explain why acts of memory in *The Gunny Sack* are often informed by a sense of melancholy—a deep sadness that the present owes to the death of the old.

A good example of the Promethean principle can be seen at the beginning of Chapter 12, "Forbidden Fruit," where Salim employs a particularly relevant figure, the model of the ship *SS Nairobi*, to reflect upon the death of his father and problem of memory (*The Gunny Sack*, 126–127). Readers of the novel will remember that Salim's father, Juma, dies at a fairly early age, leaving behind a rather young family. Due to his early death, he comes to occupy an abnormally large place in the domestic scene in which Salim grows up. In what amounts to idolatry, his framed picture stays permanently

on the living-room wall, and young Salim is on one memorable occasion severely punished for eating imported apples that are meant to honor his memory. Given the inhibiting presence of the father's legacy, young Salim has, as it were, to subject the father to a second death in order that he may grow into a man. The first sense in which he symbolically slays his dead father is when he eats the imported South African fruit, and the second is when he witnesses the slow disintegration of the ship, which occupies a position rivaling, but also complementing, Juma's portrait. If Salim renders his father's picture impotent by figuring it as idyllic, benevolent and thus harmless, the gradual sundering of the ship furthers this metaphorical patricide, which has to be undertaken if Salim is to make his own history and thus leave his own legacy. Young Salim's awe at the ship's model is seriously dissipated when he sees a real, life-size ship sailing into the Dar es Salaam harbor. Although the true identity of the "real" ship eludes him in his hurry to announce his moment of awareness, a point onto which Vassanji puts emphasis as if to cast aspersions at arrogant assumptions of knowledge, it marks the point when Salim begins to reconcile to the inevitability of loss. It is important for the reader to note that the model is destroyed precisely because of the exigencies of daily life, just as the quotidian demands of eking out a livelihood gradually evacuate Juma from the realms of the living-dead to that of faint memory. Used as a piggy-bank, the model is one day broken in order that a much needed hundred-shilling note may be retrieved. It is due to such a mundane concern that this important bank of memory is thrust into the Promethean creative–destructive cycle of death and regeneration.

Recalling the destruction of the ship's model from the the vantage point of his adulthood, Salim comments wryly about this moment of youthful epiphany: "The past is just this much beyond reach, you can reconstruct it only through the paraphernalia it leaves behind in your gunny sack . . . and then who would deny that what you manufacture is only a model" (*The Gunny Sack*, 127). Salim himself is very much aware that his reconstruction of the saga of his family and community is a creative intervention rather than just the mechanical retrieval of a determinate set of data. He thus draws our attention to the status of historiography as an act of sorcery. Although Ji Bai, the grand-aunt who bequeaths to him a store of memories, only "[opens] a small window into that dark past for [him]," he proceeds to fabricate "a whole world" out of the restricted piece of highly mediated historical information (135). It is to this conception of history-writing as sorcery and mythology that I now turn.

Hayden White, in his famous critique of positivist historiography, *The Content of the Form*, comments that "mythic narrative is under no obligation to keep the two orders of events, real and imaginary, distinct from one another. Narrative becomes a problem only when we wish to give real events the form of story. It is because real events do not offer themselves as stories

that their narrativization is so difficult." For White, objectivity in historical narrative is impossible because objectivity "is defined by the absence of all reference to the narrator . . . No one speaks. The events seem to tell themselves."[39] Although White's suggestion that history is a close relation to myth upsets attempts to establish firm typologies of knowledge, Vassanji seems to take this argument a step further in order to attempt to undermine what he seems to regard as the absolutist character of History with capital "H." In addition, his attempt to retrieve subjugated knowledges from the recesses of popular memory runs against the canonical procedures of nationalist and colonialist historiography. Both Vassanji's novel and White make the case that historical narrative is akin to myth to the extent that it cannot be extricated from the imagination of whoever produces it, that all a historian can ever know about the past are discourses from that past. For this reason, *The Gunny Sack* seeks to enlist the reader into a tacit contract to accept it both as "story" and "history"—in fact, it seeks to dissolve the boundary between the two categories. The novel drafts this contract by an act that I consider to be one of Vassanji's most important but unsolvable riddles: the collocation of sacral (prophetic) and secular temporalities. Both of these temporal categories are of course informed by myth, although the latter seeks recognition as a rational and scientific mode of grasping time.

Although the general outline of *The Gunny Sack* approximates the familiar periodization of East African history—from the "dark" days of precolonialism, through the "enlightenment" of the colonial period, to the "relapse" stage of independence—this runs parallel to and is complemented by an even less-concealed mythical structure of historical memory. This structure is most visibly embodied in the technique of foreshadowing and in the cyclic histories that pervade the novel. These could be read as indicators of Vassanji's experimentation with notions of fate and predetermination that have a strong presence in many of the world's religions, especially those of India. A vivid example of this prophetic temporalization is offered to the reader when young Ji Bai has her palm read by the pandit at Junapur in India: "I see a successful marriage in this hand [ . . . ] you will be married to a *second*-timer, and your hand shows *many-many* children" (*The Gunny Sack*, 18). To her consternation, Ji Bai soon discovers that she is to be married to Gulam, a young man whose family resides in Africa, thus fulfilling the prophecy. Lest the reader be tempted to dismiss this as an odd magical quirk in what is otherwise a straightforward realist narrative, it is important to note that the narrator remarks, without the slightest hint of irony or any other distancing device, that the pandit's prophecy has indeed come true (19). Vassanji's aim here might be to undermine the rigid, rational logic that has undergirded the standard bourgeois novel. But if indeed he succeeds in doing this, he does so at the expense of subverting what seems to me to be one of his key projects: questioning deterministic historiography. If Vassanji's main aim is to pose a challenge to modernity's categories of progress, history and

reason, this gesture is undercut by a crucial loophole in his narrative. Those readers familiar with the postmodernist critique of the Enlightenment will recall that the Enlightenment derives its teleology from Judae-Christian theories of history, whose basic premises Vassanji seems to share.[40] If modernty's teleology suggests that the broad outlines of history can be mapped out with some degree of certainty, Vassanji's prophetic temporality seems to suggest a similar idea. For what is the meaning of the pandit's divination of Ji Bai's life if not that the future histories of subjects are already-known, that history is simply the fulfillment of a design or a movement towards a goal?

However, in one of the most significant reversals in the narrative's structuring of time, the reader is confronted with a different image of history as repetition. This can be seen in the cyclic motions in which Salim and some of his forebears get trapped. Although Salim creates a vivid picture of himself as a rebel within the Shamsi community, at crucial moments, he repeats what his ancestors have done. For instance, when he arrives at the National Service camp at Kaboya, one of the first things he does is to report to the local *mukhi*, like his grandfather many years ago (*The Gunny Sack*, 207). In a repetition of Dhanji Govindji's ill-fated romance with the slave-woman, Bibi Taratibu, Salim ends up marrying from within the Shamsi community after an unsuccessful love affair with Amina, a Swahili woman. The past is repeated in the present, in spite of Salim's claim to being a new type. Weighed down upon by the traditions of the Shamsi, Salim's response is "Running away [...] Wanderlust," a modernist embrace of exile as an escape from the nightmare of a cyclic history (*The Gunny Sack*, 65).[41] But he soon realizes that the change and transformation that his flight promises are mere illusions. A resolution to his existential crisis can only be secured by a confrontation with that history, and not its transcendence.

The commonality between historiography and myth that I have already alluded to is, perhaps, most vividly captured through the memory-device of the gunny sack and Dhanji Govindji's padlocked books. The gunny and the journals are echoes of Arabic narrative figures such as the genie bottle and mythological Greek objects, for instance the Pandora's box, from which issue fantastic possibilities:

> Kala, The Jinn Abdul testifies that he who opens the book takes the full weight of the consequences on his own head.
>
> *The same thing in Swahili (that's what the Arabic script said – they used Arabic in those days.) Jinn Abdul be damned! I say let's open these books and find out what the old man was up to!*
>
> (*The Gunny Sack*, 12)

Like the figure who emerges from genie bottles, the contents of the gunny and the three books are turned into the service of Salim the narrator. He can arrange the material that these mementos present in order to address

his personal desire for self-knowledge. To that extent, Salim is a sorcerer, conjuring elaborate narratives out of the flimsy fragments of information that Ji Bai bequeaths to him. However, this relation of the sorcerer to his material is never a stable one, for the mementos from the past also have a life of their own. As Terdiman observes in his rejection of a "Nietzschean postmodernism," past experiences "remain massively present and determinant" and continue to wield a "seemingly sovereign influence over our present ... However protean, volatile, or inaccessible our memories may be, they have a massive determining power that models of unlimited hermeneusis misrecognize."[42] As agents of their own being, a point well-conveyed by Vassanji through his anthropomorphizing of the gunny sack, the mementoes from the sack can unleash powerful forces onto those who try to manipulate them. For instance, Salim's archival research into his family history creates discord between himself and his relatives, who would prefer that their history remains sanitized or hidden. Even more importantly, the suggestion that the past is not a passive entity draws attention to memory as an interface between past and present. The past presents a threat to the living even as they use it to cater for their needs. This provides for a powerful argument against the view that "the past is history," for even as Salim deploys the past for his own agenda, he is frequently exposed to its more threatening and refractory aspects. In other words, the past has an inherent facticity that the present cannot unilaterally undo without serious consequences for critical memory.[43] One could therefore argue that Salim's magical animation of the past serves the purpose of defending memory, and emphasizing the weight of the past, in a modern context characterized by an obsessive quest for newness. This is perhaps the best explanation for the fact that the past in *The Gunny Sack* wields a power far exceeding Salim's attempts to use it for his own present needs.

Vassanji's desire to go beyond a singular interpretation of the past, as I have suggested, is manifest in his refusal to draw a strict line between story and history, recall and imagination, truth and fiction, the secular and the prophetic. As many of the debates in the fields of literature and history over the last two decades suggest, it is no longer tenable to draw a strict line between history and literature as truth-claiming genres of knowledge. Both of these generic categories produce their own truth-effects, thus frustrating the monochromatic divisions between truth and fiction, appearance and reality, and so on. *The Gunny Sack* pretends to create a line between mythology and history—"And so much for mythology, says Shehru. Now for some history"—but the dividing line between these two cannot really be defined by a narrative of this sort, which disclaims the possibility of total and irrefutable recall (7). The result of this tension between different epistemological categories is a hybrid narrative that combines seemingly incongruent elements. Alongside real historical events, such as the Maji Maji uprising, the Mau Mau insurgency, the Arusha Declaration of 1967 and the Zanzibari

revolution of 1964, are many other anecdotes that seem to defy reason. One example is Kulsum's myth of creation:

> When God was well and ready after all his exertions finally to create mankind, he sat himself beside a red-hot oven with a plate of dough. From this he fashioned three identical dolls. He put the first doll into the oven to finish it, but, alas, brought it out too soon: it came out white and undone. In this way was born the white race. With this lesson learnt, the almighty put the second doll into the oven, but this time he kept it in for too long. It came out burnt and black. Thus the black race. Finally the One and Only put the last doll inside the oven, and brought it out at just the right time. It came out golden brown, the Asian, simply perfect. (73)

Read with a narrow focus on whether it reflects an actual historical event, Kulsum's allegory of race is virtually useless. However, its historical significance becomes evident once the reader pays attention to the historical circumstances that it reflects: in this case, the vexed history of racial relations in the colonial world and the attempts by ordinary people to create comforting narratives of themselves. It is through myth that the novel is able to capture the consciousness of the community and to take into account the sensibilities of the many non-literate people whose memories are mediated through oral genres. The granting of space to mythology, however, exceeds a mere attempt to accommodate non-literate cultures; in any case, even the written, official history disbursed by the British is shown to have its basis in myth.

The notion that even colonial historiography has its basis in myth is illustrated in Salim's first encounter with Lake Victoria, a palimpsest already inscribed with several layers of colonial meaning. On encountering the lake, Salim experiences a tension between his deep implication in colonial culture and his desire to transcend that conditioning:

> History reflected from that shimmering vastness: what matter if the mind cautioned you to take that history, its white man's romance, with a grain of salt? . . . meanwhile how can I help thinking of Speke and Burton, Livingstone and Stanley . . . . (201)

It dawns on Salim that history as written by the European colonizers is itself not free of the mythical qualities he would otherwise attribute to Shamsi oral history, hence his naming of the colonial narrative of exploration and discovery as a "white man's romance." The duplicity of colonial historiography that Salim gestures at here is one that arises from a need to capture the imagination of colonial subjects, while also convincing them that colonial values are purely rational and thus beyond mere superstition.

Colonial knowledge thus straddles the imaginary and the real, while masking that very duality. It is the duplicity inherent in such colonial typologies that *The Gunny Sack* seeks to dismantle in its treatment of modern historical knowledge as "romance," an act of verbal sorcery. Nonetheless, as the above extract shows, the grip of colonial history is one that the narrative cannot completely escape.

Amidst the fragmentation and loss that define the immigrant condition, *The Gunny Sack* is a powerful plea for memory that embodies Vassanji's stated concern with recuperating a history threatened with demise. In an interview with Susheila Nasta, Vassanji expresses this sense of loss and the necessity of providing a remedy:

> I live in Canada and at some point I felt a tremendous sense of loss at being away from the place I grew up in, and what I did was try to recreate that life that we lived. But I think a more important motive perhaps is that that life has never been lived . . . I mean never been written about. It's something that is slowly being wiped out, and as the people who've experienced that life die away, die off, then there's no more record of that life. I think all people should have a sense of themselves, a sense of where they come from and it just happens that people in East Africa—I think Indians as well as Africans and especially in Tanzania—don't have that sense, of where they come from. There is a vague kind of oral history telling them where they come from but it's not something that you read about; it's something that's constantly changing.[44]

This strong desire to establish a permanent record of the past as an act of resistance against "death" is, as Neloufer de Mel suggests, beset by one major problem: "it carries a hegemony which 'fixes' a certain history as the authoritative one." For de Mel, this reduction is most evident in the fact that the specific story of the Shamsis "become metonymic for the larger collective experience" of Asians in Tanzania.[45] In my view, one of the greatest casualties of this flattening of history is the image of post-independence East African societies that Vassanji's narratives produce.

Vassanji attempts to overcome this problem by filtering the narrative through multiple voices and through a fragmented narrative structure that resists a singular reading. It is in his intricate balancing of the need for memory against his recognition of the shaky nature of narrative recollections of the past, that he makes one of his most memorable contributions to the debate on historical memory. Although he yearns for an archive of communal memory, he realizes that its absolute establishment would not only be the cause of a new kind of tyranny, but would also be an act of forgetting.[46] Hence, the equivocal, metafictional style of *The Gunny Sack*, a trait that is also evident in Vassanji's third novel *The Book of Secrets*.

## "What is not observed does not exist": Reading the colonial archive in *The Book of Secrets*[47]

The immediate impetus behind Pius Fernandes's decision to write the account of the past that forms the basis of *The Book of Secrets* is the discovery of the diary of Alfred Corbin, a British colonial officer in East Africa. Fernandes's decision to embark on the archival research is also spurred on by what he regards as the philistine disregard for history that pervades modern East Africa. Modernity, as Charles Taylor reminds us, is "that historically unprecedented amalgam of new practices and institutional forms (science, technology, industrial production, urbanization), of new ways of living (individualism, secularization, instrumental rationality) and of new forms of malaise (alienation, meaninglessness, a sense of impending social dissolution)."[48] Of the many kinds of malaise that come with modernity is what Richard Terdiman has named as the "memory crisis," a pervasive sense of the "disruption of organic connection with the past."[49] Within the pages of *The Book of Secrets*, as in other works by Vassanji, this sense of an epochal rupture, a disruption in the flow of time, is the result of a wide array of factors, foremost of which is the fact of migrancy. The migration of the Shamsis to East Africa coincides with the inception of colonialism in the region, an event that also creates a significant fracture in the unfolding of history. The last of these momentous shifts in history is the folding up of the colonial state in the 1960s, which is marked by a similar sense of the disruption of old certainties. This feeling of a radical break from one's ancestry, of being orphaned by the apparent death of the past, and the consequent need to provide a remedy, is what provides the motivation for *The Book of Secrets*.

*The Book of Secrets* can best be described as an attempt to tame time, to render its passage more transparent, in order to make the present more liveable. Pius Fernandes, the narrator of the novel, describes his painstaking effort at rescuing memory from the ravages of time as an attempt "to defy the blistering shimmering bustle of city life outside which makes transients of us all" (8). Modernity, signified here by the bustling city, accentuates what Patricia Tobin has named as "the genealogical imperative:" the desire to unite the last with the first, which "enacts a privileged conceptualization of human life as purposeful and therefore imbued with meaning."[50] In other words, modern dislocation increases the felt need to establish connections with what has actually gone past, or what is perceived to have been lost, in order that coherent narratives of self and community may be created. This key contradiction of modernity can be seen in the tension between a wilful forgetfulness and an attendant obsession with the past in the culture of the Indian diaspora. Concerned more about mundane questions of survival, many in the largely trade-oriented Shamsi community are actively anti-intellectual, prompting the character Sona to bemoan the "lack of a sense of history in us" (92). This philistinism is vividly portrayed in the shopkeeper Feroz, who allows

Fernandes access to the all-important diary—"the book of secrets"—only after he realizes that it has no commercial value. In the wider context of the post-colonial East Africa that Vassanji scripts, it is only tourists and visitors who care about relics from the past. So engrossed is the local population in flux and change that they routinely recycle graves and consider anything preceding World War I to belong to deep antiquity. It is to this dizzying quest for newness and the resulting sense of loss and genealogical unmooring that I now turn.

Right at the beginning of *The Book of Secrets*, Vassanji suggests that lack of knowledge of one's history is a form of social death, and that the self's history as told by another tantamounts to epistemic bondage. This understanding lies at the core of the narrative's vexed relationship to the diary of Alfred Corbin, which is viewed both as a necessary historical resource and as an embarassing reminder of European colonial voyeurism. Vassanji represents Corbin's fastidious attention to local detail as a form of theft, but also, controversially, as a necessary trait in a largely oral community in which even the recent past is soon threatened with oblivion:

> They called it the book of our secrets, kitabu cha siri zetu. Of its writer they said: He steals our souls and locks them away; it is a magic bottle, this book, full of captured spirits; see how he keeps his eyes skinned, this mzungu, observing everything we do; look how meticulously this magician with the hat writes in it, attending to it more regularly than he does to nature, with more passion than he expends on a woman. He takes it with him into the forest and on mountain, in war and in peace, hunting lion or sitting in judgement, and when he sleeps he places one eye upon it, shuts the other. Yes, we should steal this book, if we could, take back our souls, our secrets from him. But the punishment for stealing such a book is harsh—ai!—we have seen it. (1)

It is instructive that when Mariamu and Nurmohamed Pipa, her illiterate shopkeeper husband, finally manage get hold of the diary, they do not destroy it. It seems that for them, the potentially embarassing details that the diary holds are outweighed by the necessity of historical knowledge. Although Mariamu's stealing of the diary seems to be a way of putting her suspected sexual involvement with Corbin away from public knowledge, her decision not to destroy it indicates a reluctance to efface the past. In the case of Pipa, this ambivalent relation to the diary is cast into even sharper relief. Pipa, perhaps more than any other character in *The Book of Secrets*, exemplifies "the genealogical imperative." Born to a prostitute in the midst of a very conservative community, he is inflicted strongly by a sense of rootlessness and non-respectability. His fetishization of the diary, reflected vividly in the shrine in which he places it as a memorial to the murdered Mariamu, is a way

through which he attempts to address the genealogical crisis that his illegitimacy means. It is only once we recognize the fact of Pipa's illegitimacy, and his consequent castaway status in the community, that we can understand why he tries to steal Corbin's and Bwana Turner's diaries in spite of his illiteracy. Beyond his immediate need to prevent the scandal that might result from Mariamu's apparent involvement with Corbin, his fixation on the diaries is an attempt to manufacture a link to a heritage to which he has only the flimsiest links: "you had to belong somewhere, have a people" (*The Book of Secrets*, 140). In this, Pipa's character bears witness to Terdiman's observation that "Loss is what makes our memory of the past possible at all," an idea that can be interpreted productively in at least two ways: firstly, that unwanted information has to be forgotten in order that more relevant ones can be remembered; and secondly, that the feeling of dislocation from the past is the impetus for recollection.[51] Pipa embodies the latter tendency: he vigorously pursues the past precisely because he has only the most tenuous connection to it. In fact, Pipa's vexed relation to his genealogy can be considered as a trope for modernity's relation to history. If, as Terdiman avers, traditional society is marked by a non-anxious sense of the passage of time, memory in modernity is marked either by "monstrous hypertrophy or [. . .] pitiful underdevelopment," "*too little memory* [or] *too much*."[52] However, the yearning for an organic unity between the subject's past and present carries a risk about which Vassanji provides an important warning. Alongside Pipa's idolization of his dead wife Mariamu, and his fetishization of Corbin's diary, Vassanji sets up a more volatile image of memory as a site of tension, deletions and incompleteness. It takes the agency of the imaginative and worldly Fernandes to release this infinite potential that the diary and communal memory contain.

For a novel that is based on Corbin's diary, it is instructive that it is only seventy-eight out of the three hundred and thirty-three pages that carry any substantial extracts from the diary itself. The rest of the novel is occupied almost purely by Fernandes's attempts to fill in the gaps left out by Corbin's record. Vassanji draws the reader's attention to these lacunae in memory in order to point out that historiography is an act of conjuration: what Shane Rhodes calls "a fictional process of mastery over a silent and mute body of knowledge, a body that must be simultaneously invaded and conquered."[53] Although Rhodes's view of a docile past is limited to the extent that it denies the dialectical relationship between the past and present, or the way in which the past circumscribes the way we remember it, it suggests powerfully that memory is a creative process and not a simple reproduction of what has happened.[54] This understanding of memory as a creative process is crucial if we are to come to terms with Vassanji's reluctance to suggest a sense of closure in the novel: "it has no end, this book, it ingests us and carries us with it, and so it grows" (*The Book of Secrets*, 2). It is precisely because the novel is incomplete that it is therefore infinite; the fact that it does not

say the last word about history means that it provides the conditions for an endless reflection upon the precise meaning of that history.

In appraising the novel's insistence upon an open-ended history, it is important to consider the shadow that the colonial library casts over Vassanji's ruminations on the past. Faced with a colonized alterity that "threaten[ed] European subjectivity with destruction and annihilation," the response of many European colonial intellectuals was to deny that threat and to "claim authoritativeness for their vision."[55] The search for, and insistence upon, absolute certainty was in inverse proportion to what could actually be known by Europeans about subject peoples. In *The Book of Secrets*, this uneasy relation to native alterity is reflected in Alfred Corbin, who studiously records the lives of the inhabitants of Kikono in his diary while decrying what he considers "the inscrutability of the alien—how there must be matters of which one will never have an inkling" (48). His quest to render local cultures transparent—he relentlessly pursues "scientific objectivism" (52)—is haunted by a "menace-filled darkness" (52) that defies comprehension. In fact, his displacement is so extreme that he fails "to conjure up England out of a night in Africa" (22). Although he might be inclined to dismiss local mythology in the name of "objectivism," his own diary entries are cryptic acts of conjuration that render no transparent version of local culture and history. It is only in the company of those who share his views that his notions of culture and history are affirmed; in the midst of the people of Kikono, the artificiality of his views of the world are made apparent as he becomes aware of his strangeness. This failure to summon a language that would defy the opacity of the Other raises an important question about Corbin's ethnographic practice: If he cannot fathom what he sees, what then is the historical value of what he records? His decision to continue with his quest for knowledge, in spite of his obvious alienation, seems to be informed by the sense that what matters is not the veracity of his claims but their ability to enter the social world in a powerful way. Although this might seem an especially cynical form of power-worship, it undergirds much of the epistemological practice in Corbin's diary, and also haunts the writing of history in *The Book of Secrets* more generally. Corbin's fear of his own ignorance leads to his misrecognition of the local scene, but his status as a colonial officer immediately invests his word with an authority that it would not otherwise have. The "truth" of his writings lies in the very fact that they later become a basis for the formulation of the colonial policy of indirect rule, with profound implications for the lives of colonized people. Within this scheme, truth is an effect of power and not an a priori category that precedes power. It is these established "truths" of history that Vassanji is interested in unraveling.

One of the most notable contradictions in *The Book of Secrets* is that Fernandes's post-colonial narrative has to be mediated through the colonial "truths" produced in Corbin's diary. Yet Vassanji does not seem to be overly

concerned about resolving this contradiction. His reluctance to replace the colonial narrative with an alternative, anti-colonial one is in keeping with his scepticism about "heroic narratives of freedom struggles."[56] He is, after all, telling the story of a community whose adopted position was that of "loyal British subjects" (*The Book of Secrets*, 28), and whose interests would not necessarily have been served by the overthrow of the colonial state. This is not to mean, however, that the novel is entirely uncritical of the colonial legacy, for it attempts to bring to the surface many layers of historical knowledge that colonialism might have suppressed. For instance, a sizeable portion of the novel deals with the notion of mystery, a category which sits uneasily with the transparence that colonial "objectivism" implied. In addition, the novel privileges the value of common sense and experience over that of grand social theory. Fernandes's harsh view of Tanzania's political policy of *Ujamaa* is a particularly good example of this scepticism about large political and ethical projects. What marks out Vassanji's novel, however, is that having demonstrated the limits of one metanarrative—whether colonialist, nationalist or socialist—he is hesitant about establishing another in its place. This gesture allows for the profusion of different, competing points of view, thus complicating the quest for the past that the novel performs. Fragments of reminiscences are littered throughout the novel, but their incomplete nature prevents the congealing into form of one dominant historical discourse.

For Vassanji, incompleteness in accounts of the past is not an aberration, but an essential condition for the persistence of memory.[57] If the last word were to be said about a moment in the past, then that moment would immediately pass into a state of atrophy; the mnemonic urge would cease. It is because the past is remembered incompletely that it is remembered at all, for it is in the cracks of memory that new ones are able to take root. This logic undergirds Fernandes's unashamed decision to fill up some of the gaps in the archive by using his imagination. He draws attention to the fact that his historical account, although grounded in experience, is nonetheless an artifice, an act of conjuration. Having studied Corbin's diary and pored through a wide variety of archival information, both oral and written, all he can claim for his depiction of Corbin is this: "This is how I have come to picture him" (7). *The Book of Secrets* is a narrative that does not claim authority for itself, but its narrator must still answer to the charge of arrogance and presumption laid against him by one of his sources, Rita:

> If you cannot know these things about yourself, she tells me, what arrogance, Fernandes, to presume to peep into other lives—to lay them out bare and join them like so many dots to form a picture. These are questions that have no answer; we can never know the innermost secrets of any heart. Each dot is infinity, Pius, your history is surface. (297)

Rita's accusation lands the novel in a quandary that recalls the paralysis that informs modernity's relation to the problem of history: If the past cannot be known with complete certitude, should the historian therefore lapse into complete quietness? Should the quest for the whole be abandoned simply because one can grasp only its fragments? Fernandes's narrative solves this problem by transcending the binarism that these questions presuppose. It suggests powerfully that beyond the choice of either pure knowledge or utter silence, there lies the more attractive option of imperfection and incompleteness, which any sensitive historian needs to consider seriously. One is reminded here of Dambudzo Marechera's *The House of Hunger* in which writing, and the work of historical reconstruction, is equated to "stitching."[58] Faced with the reality of a fragmented past, the writer attempts to restore it in its entirety, but soon realizes that the artifact created still bears visible scars that give away the fact that it has been fabricated.

Vassanji's embrace of the incomplete and the imperfect in *The Book of Secrets* is not merely a local manifestation of a universal condition, but has a historically specific motivation that also warrants some attention. Writing as he does from the point of view of migrant subjects, whose lives are marked by constant movement, he cannot fall back onto discourses of nativity and belonging that underwrites much of the nationalist modes of self-telling. What he advances instead is an image of Shamsi history as a series of ruins, relics and traces spread out all over the East African landscape, but bearing no discernible form. The evanescence of the community's history is very much the result of ceaseless movement. The Shamsis, the majority of whom are petty traders, migrate from one location to the other in rapid succession. Nurmohamed Pipa, for instance, moves from Moshi to Kikono and back to Moshi, but eventually ends up in Dar es Salaam. In the early years of colonialism, the Shamsis set up several trading centers in the interior of East Africa, but many of these are abandoned depending on the exigencies of particular historical moments. Thus, when Fernandes encounters the site of the defunct trading settlement at Kikono for the first time, he is taken aback by the apparent history-lessness of the place. He cannot believe that one of the important battles of the First World War was fought there between the Germans and the British:

> There is no sign of war here, no sign of the past. History drifts about in the sand, and only the fanatically dedicated see it and recreate it, however incomplete their visions and fragile their constructs.
>
> (*The Book Of Secrets*, 175)

There is an understanding here that, for the displaced Shamsi subjects, the past can only be retrieved through a fertile imagination that can enact a suturing of the broken pieces. Inherent in *The Book of Secrets* is therefore a

consciousness of the "manufactured" nature, and thus the limited claims, of its memories. Whereas those who claim autochthony can use the local landscape to create elaborate fictions of their organic connection with the past, the immigrants cannot make any such appeals to nativity. They do not stay in one place long enough to be able to declare a timeless connection to it. Even in those moments when they seek active identification with the landscape, they are repulsed by what they perceive as its hostility, reflected in the image of a darkness that defies cognition or shifting sands that soon cover up all relics.

However, it is not only the unyielding nature of the landscape that makes memory a tortured process for Vassanji's Shamsis. To paraphrase Terdiman, an explanation is needed for the paradox that a culture whose memory is threatened perceives memory as a threat.[59] Vulnerable as a community in their African abode, and concerned as they are with respectability and cultural continuity, the migrants are especially averse to memories that would further destabilize their sense of who they are. This feeling of dread about what the past holds leads to the sanitization of memories, a process upon which Fernandes in *The Book of Secrets* and Salim in *The Gunny Sack* reflect at great length. Fernandes, for instance, sees his relationship to his many informants as similar to that of a detective to a list of suspects. Indeed, the appellation of the novel as a "book of secrets" is not a casual one, for the Shamsis are not just saddled by a failure of their mnemonic capacities, but actively partake in the suppression of embarrassing aspects of their past. It is mostly those memories of unsavory things with the potential for causing disgrace—illegitimacy, acts of violence, sexual abuse, theft and other indiscretions—that are deleted from communal memory. Anyone trying to unravel such secrets is soon marked as a muck-raker and a snoop, as Fernandes soon realizes:

> Like a snoop I must follow the threads, expose them in all their connections and possibilities, weave them together. What else is the historian but a snoop? But, no, the urge is stronger. Like a bloodhound I will follow the trail the diary leaves. Much of it bloody; it's blood that endures (91).

The historian, as Vassanji suggests, is like a scavenger, thriving on the carrion of those whom misfortune has befallen, or a sadist flourishing on the vulnerability of others. The point is that the work of the detective-historian depends very much on the weaknesses his subjects would like to efface. If Frank Maynard, the British spycatcher during the war, has to rummage through German excrement in order to find the information he requires, Fernandes, likewise, has to probe the secrets of his subjects so that he may construct his narrative. The result of this kind of probing is "a revolting odour" and a deep sense of shame (154). This takes us back to our central question: If memory is such a basic necessity for Vassanji's migrant subjects,

why does it also induce such deep contradictions when it is finally aroused? The analogy that the novel makes between the work of a muck-raking spy and that of the historian is an appropriate answer to this question. Much as secrets need to be laid bare if truth is to be achieved, such knowledge does not of necessity guarantee comfort, and the past always remains an ambiguous inheritance. As Rita avers, "the past matters, that's why we need to bury it sometimes. We have to forget to be able to start again" (*The Book of Secrets*, 298).

To return to yet another point I have already made, the vexed nature of memory-work in *The Book of Secrets* is a result of its intertextual dependence on what are already highly subjective views of what the lives of colonized people mean. As Patricia Waugh has noted in her study of self-conscious fiction, "[t]he metafictionist [and I consider Vassanji to be a particularly good one] is highly conscious of a basic dilemma: if he or she sets out to "represent" the world, he or she realizes soon that the world, as such, cannot be "represented." In literary fiction it is, in fact, possible only to "represent" the *discourses* of that world."[60] Although Waugh's counter-intuitive sense of writing as a field of unlimited semiosis, devoid of concrete referents, might seem disabling, her argument is nonetheless useful in explaining the troubled relationship to the past in Vassanji's work. If historiography is always an intertextual process, if memory-texts always bear traces even of prior texts with whom they might have an uneasy relationship, can history belong properly to a particular person or group? If a subject's utterances (which supposedly define its being) are already half another's, can the self then realize its autonomy and be sure of its own facticity? Within the Manichean economy of colonialism, are intertextuality and intersubjectivity not mere euphemisms for epistemic violence? These are questions that Vassanji confronts in *The Book of Secrets*, albeit with mixed results. Indeed, the dispute about who "owns" Corbin's diary acts as a metonymic figure for the larger ontological questions that the novel raises:

> Who owns the diary? Feroz and Rita stand poised, each with claims to it. Feroz with the finder's privilege. It is he who gave it to me [Fernandes], on trust; to him I should return it. Rita on the other hand represents the heir. That claim assumes that the diary was Pipa's. But it wasn't, it was stolen . . . The private diary of a public servant. Who are his heir—his kin? The people he served among, whose lives he influenced? The government he served? (229)

Given that the diary's contents speak of the lives of people across the racial demarcations of colonialism—and given that its material history is so richly overlain—Vassanji seems to suggest that its contents belong to anyone who might have an interest in it. From the vantage point of the colonized,

this act of seizing the colonial archive for the purpose of self-telling seems a particularly transgressive one. Whereas Corbin is aghast at this act of usurpation—"[t]he idea of it [the diary] lying hidden in an Indian duka is revolting" (323)—the theft ensures that the Shamsi can finally enter colonial history as subjects and not mute objects of Corbin's anthropology.

Even then, Fernandes is too equivocal about Corbin's ethnography to enact a powerful refutation of its basic assumptions about the place of the colonized in history. In his haste to provide a critique of African nationalist disregard for the colonial archive and the attendant intolerance of monuments of empire, the novel lets many controversial views of African history pass without close scrutiny. If Corbin in his time regards Africa as a land that needs to be brought "into the twentieth century in as painless a way as possible" (30–31)—there are echoes here of Hugh Trevor-Roper's notion of pre-colonial Africa as a history-less place—Fernandes's post-colonial narrative seems to endorse this view in its nostalgia for an unspoilt Africa.[61] If Corbin, eighty years earlier, considers Lake Chala as a pristine "site of Creation itself" (60), Fernandes exhibits a similar yearning for an Africa that is not "man-made" (61, 178). Following in the footsteps of Corbin as he does, his willingness to push Africa back into anterior time is not totally surprising.[62] The following is his description of the Lake Chala of post-colonial times:

> Nothing man-made here, except, on the lip of the crater, and only just noticed as we depart, is the remains of the old brick wall. This must be one of the emplacements for the machine-guns now long-silenced. It takes a feat of imagination to people this terrain with the actors of war, to hear it echo with the boom of guns. What manner of men would let these slopes be covered with guns, blood, guts? Alien, I say: then remind myself of the carnage our own leaders have wrought on the land. As we go back we see a car from Nairobi driving away from a picnic site, leaving pizza boxes behind, Maasai youths picking them up. (179)

Fernandes's romanticism at this point in the narrative does not merely indicate a concern with the degradation of the natural environment but is, more importantly, a denunciation of a post-independence society that does not subscribe to his preferred mode of African subjectivity. His vision of Africa is of a landscape and a people fixed in time, hence the incongruous image of pizza boxes in the hands of Maasai youths. However, authenticity, as Eleni Coundouriotis reminds us, is dependent upon "the erasure of context, of background."[63] For a novel like *The Book of Secrets* that is notable for its sophisticated sense of history, this attempt to decontextualize African cultures in the name of preserving their integrity is surely an unfortunate one.

As I hope to have shown in the preceding discussion, the anxiety about temporality that fuels Vassanji's quest for the past is the result of two major factors. From the one direction, the diasporic subjects of his fiction are assailed by the fact of displacement, which ignites a desire for foundational narratives to alleviate the experience of temporal disjuncture. Their nomadic existence means that they have no fixed landscape whose mnemonic resources they might draw upon, within a historical context in which culture and history are tied to territory. From another direction, they have to contend with the reality of colonialism and its attempts to institute a singular vision of culture and history, a function that is taken up later on, albeit in a slightly different form, by African nationalism. In as much as their relation to colonialism is deeply ambiguous, colonial discourse cannot contain all their desires and often frustrates alternative sources of historical and cultural meanings. Vassanji's narrative confronts these problems by rejecting the totalizing function of Enlightenment theories of history and by taking seriously views of history that colonial modernity would have suppressed. He refuses to channel the popular experience of history into a logocentric straightjacket by counterbalancing the putatively "real" with the esoteric, the mysterious with the transparent. For this reason, discordant temporalities sit side by side in his narratives, with none given absolute privilege. The reader is presented with folk versions of history that are found in myth, rumor and related categories, and whose rendering of reality eludes rationality. What results from this mish-mash of epistemological categories are narratives whose interpretations are refreshingly open-ended. I argue, though, that these salutary attempts at launching a challenge against a monochromatic vision of history are occasionally undercut by the narratives' residual investment in the discourses of empire and by what Vassanji himself derides as a cold-blooded historicism. In any case, as Greenblatt avers, "one position is always infected with traces of its radical antithesis:" even resistant texts never completely transcend the conditions of their possibility.[64]

# Conclusion

The last two decades have been characterized by a burgeoning interest in the literature of the South Asian diaspora, especially those writers who have left their countries of birth, by choice or necessity, to settle in Canada, Britain, the United States and Australia. This increased visibility for South Asian diasporic writing can be accounted for partially by the spectacular success of writers such as Salman Rushdie, Bharati Mukherjee and Michael Ondaatje, all of whom have emerged into prominence during the period, and also by the ascendance of post-colonial theory within metropolitan academies. If "Third World" texts rarely ever surfaced in literature curricula in metropolitan institutions, courses on post-colonial literatures are now offered by most major Western universities. This irruption of writings from formerly colonized countries into literary study in metropolitan institutions, especially in the context of increasing immigration from former colonies, is indeed laudable. Yet, as a large number of critics have pointed out, this increased prominence has come at a price. Simon Gikandi, to cite one example, has observed that:

> In North American universities . . . postcolonial theory has currency only to the extent that it provides a conduit for universalising 'our' theories and applying them to 'their' experiences and practices; representations of the postcolony that speak 'our' language have greater legitimacy than the ones that try and understand these 'other' worlds in their own terms; the postcolonial world has value as raw material for analysis and reflection, but any suggestion that it can be the source of theoretical reflection is often met with hostility.[1]

Quite clearly, while some ground has been conceded to post-colonial writers, their insights have had to be packaged in ways that are palatable to the dominant reading formations in the countries that still play a central role in brokering global culture. As Anne McClintock has argued, even the term "post-colonialism" itself owes its success to "the dazzling marketing

success of the term 'post-modernism,' " which occupies a more powerful role within metropolitan universities.[2] The particular insights about post-colonial societies generated in post-colonial literatures have had to piggy-back on canonical metropolitan knowledges, hence losing much of what makes them relevant in their initial sites of production.

Given these reservations about the categories through which the ascendance of South Asian diasporic literature has been mediated, I have attempted to read East African Asian writing in relation to the East African historical and literary context, even if I also pay attention to their wider Indian Ocean world and the metropolitan sites of cultural production occupied by writers such as Moyez Vassanji, Ghalib Shiraz Dhalla and Shailja Patel. One of my key frustrations in pursuing this task has been that the thematization of East African Asian history in literature has only found prominence at a moment when the diaspora no longer features strongly in intellectual debates in East Africa itself, with many of the writers having migrated and no longer participating directly in the region's intellectual life. As the career of Vassanji shows, East African Asian literature increasingly resists any reading of it as specifically East African, for it occupies an imaginative matrix that includes the Indian sub-continent, East Africa, Britain, North America, and the global South Asian diaspora. It is with this transnational nature of East African Asian writing in mind that I have interrogated the handling of themes of home and displacement by the writers under study. In spite of the commonality of their subject matter, the intellectual context of each writer has played a role in shaping the ways in which he or she has come to grapple with a multiple heritage. Heavily influenced by the creeds of contradiction and in-betweenness that have been influential in metropolitan academies since the 1980s, Vassanji accepts the margin as a place to be "at home." It is ironic that, from the perspective of his location in North America, he has drawn some of the most compelling portraits of East Africa in the colonial period, which even writers resident in East Africa itself have not matched so far. Yet in spite of his vivid portraits of East Africa, it has become an "imaginary homeland," an object of nostalgia that acts as a counterweight to alienation in the new home. Indeed, it is because of Vassanji's distance from East Africa that he uses it primarily as a scene for historical themes such as colonialism, independence and the Asian migrations to the West. In an important sense, Vassanji's narratives can be read as post mortems of the region, reflections on what led to the death of old East Africa, rather than as works concerned with more recent developments and preoccupations in the region. Although he might invoke the history of Africa extensively in his works, his moment of writing is powerfully constituted by his residence in North America, which means that his sense of location remains suspended between the old, from which he has not been able to extricate himself, and the new, which he has not been able to domesticate or to fully accept. His writing evinces a strong sense of his unease about being absorbed into a Canadian national identity in the same manner that

his characters are suspicious about the drive towards national "integration" in East Africa. Like many other writers on the margins of metropolitan cultures in Europe and North America, he posits "the consensual community as one of the greatest threats to difference" on which the East African Asian diaspora might construct its identity and consequently narrates "alterity as a productive means of rethinking their identity and their relationship to the national culture."[3] However, if the Asian diaspora's claim to difference in the metropolises can be read as an act of radicalism and resistance, in East Africa, it is more likely to invite charges of conservatism and a retreat from the ecumenical project of modernity. As Gikandi has observed, the kind of metropolitan "post-colonialism" in which Vassanji is enmeshed needs to be seen in relation to another post-colonial tradition in which "the primary failure of decolonization is seen as its inability to create a consensual and democratic sense of community and the exploitation of alterity for selfish political ends."[4] Vassanji is certainly aware of this nationalist critique of ethnicity. He might depict nationalism as homogenizing and territorializing, but is dogged by a realization that the Asians' desire for uniqueness and exclusivity came at too high a price, and that it was ultimately shored up by a colonial order that had done much damage to the quest for a true cosmopolitanism.

Writing in East Africa during the heydays of nationalism in African literature, and before the postmodernist valorization of displacement and multiple-consciousness became canonical within the academy, Nazareth and Tejani place themselves more firmly within the intellectual traditions from which Vassanji is anxious to distance himself. Nazareth's vision for modern East Africa is strongly cast in a nationalist and Fanonist mode. Nationalist discourse, with its proclamation of inclusion and a new identity beyond the colonial manipulation of ethnicity, is depicted as an important step in the creation of a truly cosmopolitan society. Since his critique of decolonization is that of one who had invested a lot of faith in the nationalist movement, his critique of the failure of decolonization is similar to that of other East African writers such as Peter Palangyo, Ngugi and Robert Serumaga. He might perform a post mortem of nationalism, but the damning analysis is also a rethinking of what needs to be done if a new, just society is to be realized. Unlike in Vassanji's writing, the post mortem is not simply a justification for leave-taking. This key point of difference is not simply a function of ideological affiliations, but also one of location. Indeed, it would be interesting to see what kind of fiction Nazareth would write in the wake of his departure from East Africa. Unfortunately, apart from his novel of leave-taking—*The General Is Up*—which he drafted in the mid-1970s, soon after he left Uganda, he has not written any fiction of note during his long exile.[5]

Like Nazareth, Bahadur Tejani also writes with a strong commitment to the nationalist quest for a consensual cultural and political community. However, his vision for a national—and, indeed, human—community is mediated through a racial prism that had been refuted at the time *Day After*

*Tomorrow* was published. In the novel, he attempted to depict an African essence—against the grain of the critiques of Negritude posed by Lewis Nkosi, Ezekiel Mphahlele and Wole Soyinka—as an antidote to a deracinating modernity. As Soyinka persuasively argued, at least three years prior to the publication of Tejani's novel:

> The myth of irrational nobility, of a racial essence that must come to the rescue of the white depravity, has run its full course. It never in fact existed, for this was not the problem but the camouflage . . . The movement which began with the war-cry of separatism, modified itself with an acknowledgement of the historical expediency of the revolt—I refer, of course, to *negritude*—has found a latter-day succession in a call to be the bridge, to bring about the salvation of the world by a marriage of abstractions . . . The reconciliation of cultures, this leaven of black contribution to the metallic loaf of European culture, is only another evasion of the inward eye. The despair and anguish which is spreading a miasma over the continent must sooner or later, engage the attention of the writer in his society or else be boldly ignored . . . A concern with culture strengthens society, but not a concern with mythology.[6]

It is only after Idi Amin's expulsion of Ugandan Asians in 1972 that Tejani properly came to terms with the realities of the nation, an account of which he presents in his essay of leave-taking, "Farewell Uganda."

What emerges in my discussion is that East African Asian writing has generally been produced under the shadow of the drive for decolonization and processes of nation-building. In varying ways, the majority of the writers in this study have eroticized nationalism, scripting romance as an allegory for the nationalist quest for a consensual community.[7] This strategy, as I have argued, needs to be seen in the light of the historical preoccupation of East African communities with the terrain of gender relations as the site in which a sense of wholeness would be maintained or lost in a rapidly modernizing society. Within the Asian communities, the concern with gender relations as the guarantor of communal reproduction was even more pronounced, given that the Asians were a minority who could quite easily lose their distinctiveness and, indeed, their privileges in a decolonized society. As students of a liberal tradition of education, and having had to come to terms with the nationalist quest for integration, the writers in this study explore romantic relations across racial and ethnic divides as a negation of the divisions of the colonial period. Nonetheless, the clear majority of these romances end up in failure, or the authors fail to pursue them to their conclusion. The failure of the characters to leap across the chasms of class and race through marriage or romance is a testimony to the writers' awareness that an aesthetic reconciliation of conflict can only be legitimated by a resolution of those conflicts on the historical stage itself. Indeed, without a dismantling of the structures

of colonialism, the ethnic-clientelist arrangements upon which the diaspora has depended, and also recognition of the ambitions of the new rulers of the independent nations, the optimism embodied in such romances is mere mystification of the kind seen in Tejani's novel.

Even in the more recent intellectual context in which cosmopolitanism and hybridity have been resurrected as a bulwark against ethnocentrism and other exclusivist ideologies of belonging, the deployment of romance and other essentially personal expressions of tolerance and acceptance cannot act as reasonable antidotes to the power structures that underlie social conflicts. As I have tried to argue, there are limits to which a voluntaristic embrace of other cultures can contribute to a transformation of society, given that not all cultures are equally available for appropriation within a global cultural economy in which metropolitan cultural categories still hold sway. In Vassanji's work, to cite one major example, the reluctance of Asian youth to understand and assimilate local East African cultures hinges on their appropriation of Western pop culture as a tool for inventing a new identity for themselves. As I have tried to demonstrate, in his celebration of cultural "mutancy" and contamination, Vassanji recognizes, but also wilfully downplays, the capacity for colonialism, the culture industry, and other loci of power, to neutralize and contain much of what is subversive in hybridity and impurity. I have shown how the vocabulary of hybridity, miscegenation and contamination—which Vassanji and other East African Asian writers use as a figure for subversion—is already conditioned by colonial discourse itself. By making this point, I am in no way suggesting that the writers are doomed to remain arrested within the logic of colonial ideology, but simply that their literary intervention into the scene of historical conflict depends on an inflation of cultural categories whose value remains highly ambiguous. In crucial ways, though, the concern with sexuality as a figure for transgression in these writings indicates that no serious study of ethnic and racial ideologies among the East African Asians is complete without a consideration of gender and sexuality as key categories in the reproduction and queering of the diasporic community.

While recognizing that the constitution of Asian identities in East Africa has hinged partly on the policing of communal borders against unwanted influences from the outside, I have argued that considerable labor is committed to policing the "inside" as well, and that the focus of this civic discipline is primarily women, who are charged with ensuring communal reproduction. The concern with the role of women, as I have argued, is most fully developed in the works of Vassanji, who attempts to excavate their submerged histories. If women, among other subjugated categories, have almost been completely written out of East African Asian historiography, his narratives act as a reminder that such acts of selective memorializing cannot cancel out the historicity of their participation in building communities. Indeed, by showing how the history of women irrupts through the facade of

male historiography, he powerfully signals at ways in which the diaspora's story may be written anew. As he and the other Asian writers are all too aware, historians have been all too ready to skim over the contribution of the diaspora to the making of East Africa. It is indeed a source of further concern that many who have tried to promote greater awareness of the role of the diaspora have perpetuated precisely the kinds of silences which they have set out to challenge by downplaying the history of women, the poor and the working classes. Keenly aware of the nature of history as a double-edged sword—a site for both the realization and suppression of desire—Vassanji's narratives have presented some of the most complex treatments of history as a literary theme in East African writing to date. As I have shown, his simultaneous valorization and problematizing of history are related to his realization that the East African Asian diaspora can only establish foundational narratives for themselves in the present by turning to the past, and a simultaneous awareness that to benefit from the past, one must also bear it as a burden. It is in the light of this that I have expressed reservations about Vassanji's representation of decolonization, noting that his deployment of irony is a way of sidestepping many of the important questions raised by anti-colonial resistance. Presenting nationalist politics only in its negative sense as intolerant of difference evades what was useful in nationalism, and the fact that the insistence on difference was itself one of the foundations of colonial power.

The golden age of diasporic Asian writing in East Africa—though a modest one—is certainly in the past, with many of the writers and other intellectuals having migrated to Europe and North America in the wake of the Ugandan expulsions and in the context of the general exodus of African intellectuals from their countries of birth. The few who remain, like Pheroze Nowrojee, Zarina Patel (the granddaughter of A. M. Jevanjee), Shailja Patel, Pally Dhillon and Yusuf Dawood, continue to write, but have little of the visibility that Tejani and Nazareth enjoyed in their time. In the context of this wave of migration, East Africa is bound to lose its status as a focus for the diaspora's writing, or become an object of nostalgia. But whatever happens, the generation of Asian writers who were born, or nurtured, in East Africa provide compelling perspectives and portraits without which the region's literatures would be the poorer. In addition to this book's concern with culture and migration, I hope also to have demonstrated that no rendering of East African literary history will ever be complete without a consideration of the writings of the South Asian diaspora. The old East Africa in which Asian writing flourished may indeed be dead, but as Vassanji would aver, "the dead also deserve their due . . . Or, as our elders said, they come to haunt your dreams" (*Uhuru Street*, 111).

# Notes

## Introduction

1. Christian Konjra Alloo, *Otieno Achach* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1966), 40.
2. Okot p'Bitek, *White Teeth* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1989), 95.
3. Walter Rodney, *The Groundings with My Brothers* (London: Bogle-l'Ouverture, 1969), 33–34. The replication of European attitudes by Africans made Dent Ocaya-Lakidi to conclude that "a great deal of the so-called African attitudes to Asians are in fact European attitudes assimilated and internalized by the Africans." Dent Ocaya-Lakidi, "Black Attitudes to the Brown and White Colonizers of East Africa," in Michael Twaddle (ed.), *Expulsion of a Minority: Essays on the Ugandan Asians* (London: The Athlone Press, 1975), 81.
4. Mahmood Mamdani, *Imperialism and Fascism in Uganda* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1983), 10.
5. For a provocation in this regard, see Dan Ojwang, " 'The Bad Baniani Sports Good Shoes': 'Asian' Stereotypes and the Problem of Modernity in East Africa," *Africa Insight* 35, 2 (2005), 4–14.
6. "Contact zones" is borrowed from Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993). She characterizes them as "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (4).
7. Sofia Mustafa, "Racial and Communal Tensions in East Africa," in East African Institute of Social and Cultural Affairs (ed.), *Racial and Communal Tensions in East Africa* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1966), 53.
8. Mariam Pirbhai, *Mythologies of Migration, Vocabularies of Indenture: Novels of the South Asian Diaspora in Africa, the Caribbean, and Asia-Pacific* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 9.
9. Rosemary Marangoly George, *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 1.
10. Rosemary George, *The Politics of Home*, 9.
11. Robert Gregory and Gaurav Desai each provide a detailed sense of East African Asian literary history, one which reaches back into the colonial period. Robert Gregory, "Literary Development in East Africa: The Asian Contribution, 1955–1975," *Research in African Literatures* 12, 4 (1981), 440–459; and Gaurav Desai, "Asian African Literatures: Genealogies in the Making," *Research in African Literatures* 42, 3 (2011), v–xxx.
12. Vijay Mishra, *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary* (London: Routledge, 2007), 4.
13. Robert G. Gregory, *India and East Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 5–8.
14. L. W. Hollingsworth approximates the date of the *Periplus* to CE 60. *The Asians of East Africa* (London: Macmillan, 1960), 11.
15. Hollingsworth, *The Asians of East Africa*, 12.

16. George Delf, *Asians in East Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 1.
17. Delf, *Asians in East Africa*, 1.
18. Reginald Coupland, *East Africa and Its Invaders* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), 301.
19. J. S. Mangat, *A History of the Asians in East Africa—c. 1886–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 14, 22.
20. Daniel D.C. Don Nanjira, *The Status of Aliens in East Africa* (New York: Praeger, 1976), 6.
21. H. S. Morris, *The Indians in Uganda: Caste and Sect in a Plural Society* (London: Weidenfield& Nicolson, 1968), 11.
22. Quoted in Roland Oliver, *Sir Harry Johnston and the Scramble for Africa* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957), 293.
23. Winston S. Churchill, *My African Journey* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1908), 49. Churchill observed that "It was the Sikh (and Punjabi Muslim) soldier who bore an honorable part in the conquest and pacification of these East African countries. It is the Indian trader who, penetrating and maintaining himself in all sorts of places to which no white man would go or in which no white man could earn a living, has more than anybody else developed the early beginnings of trade and opened up the first slender means of communications" (49).
24. Quoted in Mahmood Mamdani, *Politics and Class Formation in Uganda* (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1976), 110.
25. George Delf, *Asians in East Africa*, 18. This was the phrase a group of European-settler women used in a telegram to Queen Mary, imploring her to stop further Indian immigration into Kenya.
26. Elspeth Huxley, *White Man's Country*. Huxley recalls white fears of the time: "White civilization would be swamped in a brown enfranchised flood and the white settlers, not to mention the indigenous native, politically butchered to make an Indian holiday" (116).
27. John Maximian Nazareth, *Brown Man Black Country: A Peep into Kenya's Freedom Struggle* (New Delhi: Tidings Publications, 1981), 71.
28. Hollingsworth, *The Asians of East Africa*, 99–107.
29. J. S. Mangat, *A History of the Asians in East Africa*, 111.
30. J. S. Mangat, *A History of the Asians in East Africa*, 114.
31. For a discussion of the link between Christian mission school culture and anti-Indian attitudes, see Michael Twaddle, "Z. K Sentongo and the Indian Question in East Africa," *History in Africa*, 24 (1997), 309–336.
32. For more information on the relationship between the Indian press and Kenyan nationalist movements, see Felice Carter, "The Asian Press in Kenya," *East Africa Journal*, 6, 10 (October 1969), 30–34.
33. Examples include Jacqueline Bardolph, "East Africa: The Novel Since the Eighties," in André Viola, Jacqueline Bardolph and Denise Coussy (eds.), *New Fiction in English From Africa* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), 77–107; Amin Malak, "Ambivalent Affiliations and the Postcolonial Condition: The Fiction of M. G. Vassanji," *World Literature Today* 67, 2 (1993), 277–282; Anne Koshi, "The Afro-Asian and American Dreams of Race Relations in Bahadur Tejani's *Day After Tomorrow*," *Wasafiri* 13 (1991), 11–13; John Scheckter, "Peter Nazareth and the Ugandan Expulsion: Pain, Distance, Narration," *Research in African Literatures* 27, 2 (1996), 83–93; and several articles that appear in the special issue, "Asian African Literatures," *Research in African Literatures* 42, 3 (2011), edited by Gaurav Desai.

34. Pallavi Rastogi, *Afrindian Fictions: Diaspora, Race and National Desire in South Africa* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2010), 18.
35. Rasna Warah, *Triple Heritage: A Journey to Self Discovery* (Nairobi: R. Warah, 1998), 12.
36. Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989).
37. Mariam Pirbhai, *Mythologies of Migration,* 17.
38. Ronit Frenkel, *Reconsiderations: South African Indian Fiction and the Making of Race in Postcolonial Culture* (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2010).
39. Devarakshanam Govinden, *'Sister Outsiders': The Representation of Identity and Difference in Selected Writings by South African Indian Women* (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2008), 32.
40. M. G. Vassanji, *The Gunny Sack* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1989), 145. All subsequent references are in the text.
41. Chinua Achebe and Nurrudin Farah, *Writers in Conversation: Chinua Achebe with Nurrudin Farah*, videocassette, Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1986. Frederick Buell notes, in a discussion of identity, that "the search for the uninfected—primordial, bounded, perhaps the essentialized—kernel of 'native' culture becomes more like unwrapping an onion: one finds relationships (global, regional) beneath relationships, not a hard, definite, genuinely local core." *National Culture and the New Global System* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1994), 40.
42. Ronita Torcato, "The Eyes of the Peacock," *Sunday Herald* (Bangalore, 12 April 1998).
43. Vijay Mishra, *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora*, 2–3.
44. Bahadur Tejani, "Farewell Uganda," *Transition*, 75/76 (The Anniversary Issue), 262. Originally published in *Transition* 42 (1974).
45. "You are a paper citizen and will run away" is the accusation that Kenyan parliamentarian Martin Shikuku leveled at his Asian compatriot, Krishna Guatama, during a parliamentary debate in 1982. "Debate Over the Role of Kenya Asians," *The Weekly Review*, November 12 (1982), 3. Donald Rothchild reports about a black Kenyan respondent who, "describing Asians . . . as 'bloodsuckers and parasites,' maintained that such people, even if citizens, should not be given equal chances with Africans because 'they've exploited us enough and this is now our chance.' " *Racial Bargaining in Independent Kenya: A Study of Minorities and Decolonization* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 174.
46. Agehananda Bharati, *The Asians in East Africa: Jayhind and Uhuru* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1972), 5.
47. The phrase "triple heritage," in reference to the historical experience of East African Asians, is Rasna Warah's. *Triple Heritage*.
48. Arun Mukherjee, *Oppositional Aesthetics: Readings from a Hyphenated Space* (Toronto: TSAR, 1994), 169. Admittedly, Mukherjee's observation was made before Vassanji won Canada's most prestigious literary award, the Giller Prize, for *The Book of Secrets* (London: Picador, 1994) and *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (Toronto: Doubleday, 2003).
49. M. G. Vassanji (ed.), "Introduction," in *A Meeting of Streams: South Asian Canadian Fiction* (Toronto: TSAR, 1985), 2–3.
50. M. G. Vassanji, personal communication, e-mail, February 9, 2000.

51. Simon Gikandi, "Reading the Referent: Postcolonialism and the Writing of Modernity," in Susheila Nasta (ed.), *Reading the 'New' Literatures in a Postcolonial Era* (London: D. S. Brewer, 2000), 88–89.
52. Tejaswini Niranjana, *Mobilizing India: Women, Music and Migration Between India and Trinidad* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 6.
53. Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992), 12.

## 1 The Pleasures and Tribulations of Migration

1. James Clifford has cautioned that "We should be able to recognize the strong entailment of Jewish history on the language of diaspora without making that history a definitive model." Those words are instructive, especially because "diaspora" has become a trope that is used to speak about so many different experiences, even those clearly beyond its scope. See Clifford's "Diasporas," *Cultural Anthropology* 9, 3 (1994), 306.
2. Edward Said, "Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginals," in Moustafa Bayoumi and Andrew Rubin (eds.), *The Edward Said Reader* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 369. Eva Hoffman also observes that "In medieval Europe exile was the worst punishment that could be inflicted. This was because one's identity was defined by one's role and place in society; to lose that was to lose a large portion of one's self. "The New Nomads," *The Yale Review* 86, 4 (1998), 44.
3. Eva Hoffman, "The New Nomads."
4. Edward Said, "Intellectual Exile," 373.
5. See, for instance, Rob Nixon's *London Calling: V.S. Naipaul, Postcolonial Mandarin* (New York & London: Oxford University Press, 1992); and Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory*.
6. Eva Hoffman, "The New Nomads," 43.
7. Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (London: Routledge, 1994) 24.
8. Simon Gikandi, *Writing in Limbo: Modernism and Caribbean Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 34.
9. Ngugi wa Thiongo, *Homecoming: Essays of African and Caribbean Literature* (London: Heinemann, 1972), 89.
10. For a discussion of this, see James Ogude, *Ngugi's Novels and African History: Nation and Narration* (London: Pluto Press, 1999), 81–86.
11. Chris Wanjala, *For Home and Freedom* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1980), 55.
12. Chris Wanjala, *For Home and Freedom*, 55.
13. See Taban lo Liyong (ed.), "My Father, His Life and Death, My Wife, My Art, and All That," in *The Last Word: Cultural Synthesism* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1969).
14. George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* (London: Allison and Busby, 1984), 34.
15. Saying that the majority of East African writers of a nationalist persuasion were hostile to lo Liyong's rhetoric of alienation is not to say that they had successfully rid themselves of all forms of displacement and contradiction. For instance, Peter Nazareth has written of Ngugi's multiple writerly personalities in a reading of what is one of Ngugi's most polemical nationalitarian tracts, *Petals of Blood*. Peter Nazareth, "The Second Homecoming: Multiple Ngugi's in *Petals of Blood*," in Georg Gugelberger (ed.), *Marxism and African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1985), 118–129.
16. George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile*, 229.

17. John Lonsdale, "KAU's Cultures: Imaginations of Community and Constructions of Leadership in Kenya After the Second World War," *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 13, 1 (2000), 114–115.
18. Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity*, 28.
19. Homi Bhabha (ed.), "Dissemination: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation," in *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), 318.
20. Bahadur Tejani, *Day After Tomorrow* (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1971), 141. All further references are in the text.
21. For a brief discussion of multi-racialism in late colonial Tanganyika, see *The Tanganyika Way* the political autobiography of the Tanzanian Asian politician, Sophia Mustafa.
22. Rosemary Marangoly George, *The Politics of Home* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 173.
23. Within East African universities, such Negritudist ideas were partly a result of the overall pursuit of a "black aesthetic," an attempt to end the dominance of the English canon in literary education. Tejani attended the University of Nairobi in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a time when the quest for an African "sensibility" in literature was taking root. This might explain the Negritudist vision of *Day After Tomorrow*. For an account of literary education in Kenyan universities in the post-independence era, see Apollo O. Amoko, "The Problem of English Literature: Canonicity, Citizenship, and the Idea of Africa," *Research in African Literatures* 32, 4 (2001), 19–43.
24. In *Day After Tomorrow*, the alienated nature of modernity is captured in the impersonal machine that injures an anonymous worker at the brewery. The narrative decries "the domination of the individual by [the] machine" and depicts "the horrid monotony" of the machine age as "an insult to mankind" (107).
25. For a particularly caustic reading of Negritude, see Ayi Kwei Armah, "African Socialism: Utopian or Scientific?" *Présence Africaine* 64 (1967), 18–21.
26. Timothy F. Weiss, *On the Margins: The Art of Exile in V.S. Naipaul* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 103.
27. V. S. Naipaul, *The Mimic Men* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969).
28. Peter Nazareth, *In A Brown Mantle* (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1972). All further references are in the text.
29. The harsh English winter that D'Souza suffers through recalls that which faces the West Indian immigrant in Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1956).
30. The phrase is Amin Malak's. "Ambivalent Affiliations and the Postcolonial Condition: The Fiction of M. G. Vassanji," *World Literature Today* 67, 2 (1993), 277–282.
31. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), 281.
32. Tirop Peter Simatei, *The Novel and the Politics of Nation Building in East Africa* (Bayreuth: African Studies Series, 2001), 105.
33. John Scheckter, "Peter Nazareth and the Ugandan Expulsion: Pain, Distance, Narration," *Research in African Literatures* 27, 2 (1996), 83.
34. Peter Nazareth, "Alienation, Nostalgia, and Homecoming: Editing an Anthology of Goan Literature," *World Literature Today* 59, 3 (1985), 374.
35. Peter Nazareth, "Alienation, Nostalgia, and Homecoming," 378.
36. Peter Nazareth, *The General Is Up* (Toronto: TSAR, 1991), 114. All further references are in the text. It was often rumored that General Idi Amin Dada, who

expelled the Asians from Uganda in 1972, was of non-Ugandan origin. Members of his ethnic group, the Kakwa, live in three countries: Uganda, Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo.
37. "Shamsi" is Vassanji's fictional name for the Ismailia Muslim sect in East Africa.
38. Rosemary George, *The Politics of Home*, 194.
39. Rosemary George, *The Politics of Home*, 186.
40. Rosemary George, *The Politics of Home*, 189.
41. Neloufer de Mel, "Mediating Origins: Moyez Vassanji and the Discursivities of Migrant Identity," in Abdulrazak Gurnah (ed.), *Essays on African Writing Vol II: Contemporary Literature* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1995), 167.
42. Cited in Terry Eagleton, "Nationalism: Irony and Commitment," in Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson and Edward W. Said (eds.), *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 23.
43. Peter Nazareth, "The First Tanzan/Asian Novel," *Research in African Literatures* 21, 4 (1989), 130.
44. Tom Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain* (London: Verso, 1981).
45. See, for instance, Kulsum's myth of creation. *The Gunny Sack*, 73.
46. M. G. Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* (London: Picador, 1996). All further references are in the text.
47. Chelva Kanaganayakam, "'Broadening the Substrata': An Interview with M. G. Vassanji," *World Literature Written in English* 31, 2 (1991), 24.
48. This phrase is from Cliff Richard's song "Traveling Light." Rosemary George uses it extensively in her book *The Politics of Home* to refer to a migrant existence unencumbered by too much cultural baggage.
49. M. G. Vassanji, *No New Land* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1991). All further references are in the text.
50. Timothy Weiss, *On the Margins*, 10.
51. Amin Malak, "Ambivalent Affiliations and the Postcolonial Condition," 280.
52. Chelva Kanaganayakam, "Broadening the Substrata," 27.
53. Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 10.

## 2 Indian Ocean Travel and Belonging in Nanji Kalidas Mehta's *Dream Half-Expressed*

1. Savita Nair, *Moving Histories: Gujarat, East Africa and the Indian Diaspora, 1880–2000* (PhD dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2001), 152.
2. Nanji Kalidas Mehta, *Dream Half-Expressed: An Autobiography* (Bombay: Vakils, Feffer and Simons, 1966), 4. Further references are in the text.
3. Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore and London: 1978), 126.
4. See Reginald Coupland, *East Africa and Its Invaders* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938); Edward Alpers, *East Africa and the Indian Ocean* (Princeton: Markus Weiner Publishers, 2009); J. S. Mangat, *A History of the Asians in East Africa—c. 1886 to 1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969); Robert Gregory, *India and East Africa: A History of Race Relations within the British Empire* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971).
5. Gunvantrai Acharya, *Dariyalal* (Calcutta: Dictum, 2000).
6. Bharat Desai and Himanshu Kaushik, "The Godmother Rules Supreme over This Port City," *Times of India*. Posted 5 March 2004. Retrieved 20 August 2009 from

the World Wide Web: http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/The-Godmother-rules-supreme-over-this-port-city/articleshow/538729.cms.
7. Michael Pearson, *The Indian Ocean* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 67.
8. Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 359.
9. Savita Nair, *Moving Histories*, 133.
10. See, for instance, Rehana Ebr.-Vally, *Kala Pani: Caste and Colour in South Africa* (Cape Town: Kwela, 2001).
11. Savita Nair, *Moving Histories*, 129.
12. See Helene Basu, "Slave, Soldier, Trader, Faqir: Fragments of African Histories in Western India (Gujarat)," in Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya and Richard Pankhurst (eds.), *The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2003), 235–241.
13. Chelva Kanaganayakam, "'Broadening the Substrata': An Interview with M. G. Vassanji," *World Literature Written in English* 31, 2 (1991), 28–29.
14. W. Travis Hanes, "On the Origins of the Indian National Congress: A Case Study of Cross-Cultural Synthesis„ *Journal of World History* 4, 1 (1993), 71–2.
15. Christophe Jaffrelot, "Hindu Nationalism: Strategic Nationalism in Ideology Building," *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, 12/13 (20–27 March 1993), 517–524. Also see John John Zavos, "The Arya Samaj and the Antecedents of Hindu Nationalism," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 3, 1 (April 1999),57–81.
16. William A. Shack, "Introduction," William A. Shack, Elliott Percival Skinner and Herschelle Challenor (eds.), *Strangers in African Societies* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979), 4.
17. See Duygu Köksal, "The Dilemmas of a Search for Cultural Synthesis: A Portrait of Cemil Meriç as a Conservative Intellectual," *New Perspectives on Turkey* 21 (Fall 1999), 79–101.
18. See Taban lo Liyong, *The Last Word: Cultural Synthesism* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1969).
19. Isabel Hofmeyr, "The Black Atlantic Meets the Indian Ocean: Forging New Paradigms of Transnationalism for the Global South—Literary and Cultural Perspectives," *Social Dynamics* 33, 2 (2007), 19.
20. John Zavos, "The Arya Samaj," 63.
21. Oyekan Owomoyela, *The African Difference: Discourses on Africanity and the Relativity of Cultures* (Johannesburg and New York: Witwatersrand University Press and Peter Lang, 1996).
22. Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism* (London: Macmillan, 1918); Jawaharlal Nehru, *An Autobiography* (London: John Lane the Bodley Head, 1942); John Maximian Nazareth, *Brown Man Black Country* (New Delhi: Tidings Publications, 1981).
23. Isabel Hofmeyr, "The Black Atlantic Meets the Indian Ocean"; Edward Alpers, *East Africa and the Indian Ocean*; and Uma Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie, "The Place of India in South African History: Academic Scholarship, Past, Present and Future," *The South African Historical Journal* 57 (2007), 12–34.
24. Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (London: Viking, 1988), 343.
25. Savita Nair, *Moving Histories*, 143.

## 3 Gastropolitics and Diasporic Self-Writing

1. Arjun Appadurai, "Gastro-politics in Hindu South Asia," *American Ethnologist* 8, 3 (1981), 494.

2. Arjun Appadurai, "Gastro-politics," 494.
3. James Ogude, "The State as a Site of Eating: Literary Representation and the Dialectics of Ethnicity, Class and the Nation State in Kenya," *Africa Insight* 39, 1 (2009), 5–21; Eleonore Schmitt and Werner Graebner, "*Sukumawiki*: Food and Drink in the Nairobi Novels of Meja Mwangi," *Matatu* 9 (1992), 133–151.
4. For a discussion of gastro-politics in the three texts, see Derek Wright, *Ayi Kwei Armah 's Africa: The Sources of His Fiction* (London: Zell Publishers, 1989); James Ogude, "Allegory and the Grotesque Image of the Body: Ngugi's Portrayal of Depraved Characters in Devil on the Cross," *World Literature Written in English* 36, 2 (1997), 77–91; and G. Odera Outa, "The Dramaturgy of Power and Politics in Post-colonial Kenya: A Comparative Re-reading of 'Forms', in Texts by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Francis Imbuga," *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 10, 3 (2001), 344–365, respectively.
5. Recent African fiction that takes seriously ordinary aspects of material culture, making such artifacts important literary tropes and sources of thematic meaning, are generally in line with Njabulo Ndebele's call in the 1980s for a "rediscovery of the ordinary" in South African literature. By "rediscovery of the ordinary," Ndebele meant a literature that paid scrupulous attention to the details of daily life, as opposed to spectacle, as the basis for its politics. Njabulo Ndebele, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture* (Johannesburg: COSAW, 1991).
6. See Brenda Cooper, *A New Generation of African Writers: Migration, Material Culture and Language* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2008).
7. Arjun Appadurai, "Gastro-politics."
8. Arjun Appadurai, "Gastro-politics," 494.
9. Vikram Doctor, "East African Cuisine in Black and White," http://blogs.economictimes.indiatimes.com/onmyplate/entry/east-african-indian-cuisine-in1. Posted 19 October 2009. Accessed 3 November 2010.
10. Jameela Siddiqi, Personal Conversation, Johannesburg, 18 June 2007. In March 2012, Siddiqi travelled to Uganda for the first time since the 1972 expulsions.
11. Jameela Siddiqi, *The Feast of the Nine Virgins* (London: Bogle-L'Ouverture, 2001), 1. Further references are in the text.
12. Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, *The Settler's Cookbook: A Memoir of Love, Migration and Food* (London: Portobello Books, 2008), 13. Further References are in the text.
13. Arjun Appadurai, "Gastropolitics," 509.
14. Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, *No Place Like Home* (London: Virago Press, 1995), 6. Further references are in the text.
15. Julia Kristeva, "On the Melancholic Imaginary," *New Formations* 3 (1987), 5–6, 12.
16. Vikram Doctor, "East African Cuisine in Black and White."
17. Arjun Appadurai, "How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 30, 1 (1988), 5, 18.
18. Brinda Mehta, "Indo-Trinidadian Fiction: Female Identity and Creative Cooking," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 19 (1999), 153.
19. Lydie Moudileno, "Magical Realism: 'Arme miraculeuse' for the African Novel," *Research in African Literatures* 37, 1 (2006), 33.
20. Arjun Appadurai "How to Make a National Cuisine," 10.
21. Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in Amy Gutmann (ed.), *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994), 25–73.

22. For a historical discussion of Indian-African food fusion in East Africa, see Maurice Amutabi, "Interrogating Trans-Indian Ocean Culinary Diffusion in Africa: The Case of *Chapati* and *Pilau* in Kenya and their Indian and Arab Origins," paper presented at the conference on Cultural Exchange and Transformation in the Indian Ocean World, University of California, Los Angeles, 5–6 April 2002.
23. Amitav Ghosh, "The Diaspora in Indian Culture," *Public Culture* 2, 1 (1989), 73–78.
24. Arjun Appadurai, "How to Make a National Cuisine," 15.
25. Stuart Hall, "Minimal Selves," in Homi K Bhabha and Lisa Appignanesi (eds.), *Identity: The Real Me. Postmodernism and the Question of Identity*, ICA Documents 6 (London: ICA, 1987), 44
26. Cheryl-Ann Michael, "On the Slipperiness of Food," in Sarah Nuttall (ed.), *Beautiful/Ugly: African and Diaspora Aesthetics* (Durham: Duke UP, 2006), 261.
27. Cheryl-Ann Michael, "On the Slipperiness of Food," 265.

## 4 Imaging Africa, Making "Asians"

1. Leroy Vail, "Introduction: Ethnicity in Southern African History," in Leroy Vail (ed.), *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).
2. For a discussion of the recent invention and artificiality of ethnic groups, see Stephen N. Ndegwa, "Citizenship and Ethnicity: An Examination of Two Transition Moments in Kenyan Politics," *American Political Science Review* 91, 3 (1997), 600–601.
3. Charles Ponnuthurai Sarvan, "The Asians in African Literature," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 11, 2 (1976).
4. Charles Sarvan, "The Asians in African Literature," 167.
5. For a discussion of ethnic consciousness as an antidote to dislocation, see Leroy Vail, "Introduction," 5–6.
6. Amin Malak, "Ambivalent Affiliations and the Postcolonial Condition: The Fiction of M. G. Vassanji," *World Literature Today* 67, 2 (1993), 278.
7. Charles Ponnuthurai Sarvan, "Ethnicity and Alienation: The African Asian and His Response to Africa," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 20, 1 (1985), 100–110.
8. Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 34–35.
9. For a discussion of V. S. Naipaul's constructions of Africa in *A Bend in the River* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1979), see Ranu Samantrai, "Claiming the Burden: Naipaul's Africa," *Research in African Literatures* 31, 1 (2000), 51–62.
10. Jagjit Singh, "Sweet Scum of Freedom," in Gwyneth Henderson (ed.), *African Theatre* (London: Heinemann, 1973). All further references are in the text.
11. "Africanism" is also Said's term. *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 67.
12. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 3.
13. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 21.
14. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 54.
15. Abdul Sheriff, "Introduction," in Abdul Sheriff (ed.), *The History and Conservation of Zanzibar Stone Town* (London: James Currey, 1995), 1.
16. The first European translation of the series of stories that make up *The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night* is widely accepted to have been done in French

by Antoine Galland, an Orientalist, in the early years of the eighteenth century (between 1704 and 1717 AD). It is reputed to have initially appeared in Arabic around 850 AD.

17. Amitav Ghosh's well-researched anthropology-travelogue-novel on the ancient connections between the Mediterranean, Africa and Asia *In an Antique Land* (London: Granta Books, 1992) has been instrumental in helping me rethink the complexly overlain and overlapping history of the East and North-Eastern African seaboard on the one hand, and of the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent on the other.
18. *The Gunny Sack*, 83. These words are uttered by Said bin Abdalla when he implores the Sultan Said Majid of Zanzibar to extend his rule to Mzizima, which later became Dar es Salaam.
19. Note that this might be a borrowing from Peter Nazareth's *The General Is Up*, in which the Goan character Ronald D'Mello is "absorbed into a black womb" upon his encounter with a Damibian woman (21).
20. Arun Mukherjee, *Oppositional Aesthetics*, 175.
21. This is the title of a short story in *Uhuru Street*.
22. Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).
23. Agehananda Bharati, *The Asians in East Africa*, 156.
24. Peter Nazareth, "Out of Darkness: Conrad and Other Third World Writers," *Conradiana* 4, 2 (1982), 182.
25. For a reading of how Blixen's novel submerges the historical concerns of black Africans in its Kenyan setting, see Simon Lewis, "Culture, Cultivation, and Colonialism in *Out of Africa* and Beyond," *Research in African Literatures* 31, 1 (2000), 63–79.
26. See John Okello, *Revolution in Zanzibar* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1967).
27. George Delf, *Asians in East Africa*, 18.
28. Mahmood Mamdani has over the years discussed how the Asian commercial bourgeoisie in Uganda managed to make it look like their own interests were the interests of the whole of the Asian diaspora in the country. See his 1976 book *Politics and Class Formation in Uganda* and his more recent article "The Ugandan Asian Expulsion: Twenty Years After."
29. The National Service in Tanzania and the National Youth Service (NYS) in Kenya were mooted by the post-independence states in order to inculcate in the youth the value of manual labor, physical discipline and self-reliance. But even more importantly, they were instituted for purposes of political indoctrination: to cultivate a sense of patriotism as defined by the governing political parties.
30. See David Maughan-Brown, *Land, Freedom and Fiction: History and Ideology in Kenya* (London: Zed Press, 1985).
31. Agehananda Bharati, *The Asians in East Africa*, 165.
32. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 36.
33. In Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, civilization is figured as the product of the sublimation of excessive primal impulses. Such repression produces morbid symptoms in the civilized. If on the one hand, these symptoms are perceived as limiting, on the other hand they provide a useful rationale for the "civilized," diasporic Asian middle classes who come to see their status as the product of an immense sacrifice. For a more specific discussion of how such ideas have filtered into the debate about East Africa's economies, see Michael Chege,

"Introducing Race as a Variable Into the Political Economy of Kenya Debate: An Incendiary Idea," *African Affairs* 97 (1998), 209–230.
34. Agehananda Bharati, *The Asians in East Africa*, 160.
35. Stuart Hall, "Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Racial Dominance," *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism* (Paris: UNESCO, 1980), 341.

## 5 Gender, Sexuality and Community

1. Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 34–35.
2. Dana April Seidenberg. *Mercantile Adventurers: The World of East African Asians 1750–1985* (New Delhi: New Age Publishers, 1996), 94.
3. Dana Seidenberg, *Mercantile Adventurers*, 100.
4. All the three sections of *The Gunny Sack* are devoted to, and named after, women: Ji Bai, Kulsum and Amina.
5. According to Neloufer de Mel, Vassanji's granting of a prominent role to women in *The Gunny Sack* is an "acknowledgement of the strong influence of women on their respective communities. The uncovering of what patriarchy subsumes coincides with the author's project of centring marginal voices." "Mediating Origins: Moyez Vassanji and the Discursivities of Migrant Identity," in Abdulrazak Gurnah (ed.), *Essays on African Writing Vol II: Contemporary Literature* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1995), 169.
6. Eleni Coundouriotis, *Claiming History: Colonialism, Ethnography, and the Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 140.
7. Quoted in James Clifford, "Diasporas," 306.
8. Dana Seidenberg, *Mercantile Adventurers*, 93.
9. Dana Seidenberg states that "the male members of caste society were dependent for their status on female chastity, the purity of their sisters and daughters whom they gave in marriage and secondarily on that of the women they took on as wives (*Mercantile Adventurers*, 94). In an interview with Kanaganayakam, Vassanji himself states that the society he is writing about is one in which "women are entrusted with carrying on the tradition." " 'Broadening the Substrata,' " 31.
10. Quoted in Dana Seidenberg, *Mercantile Adventurers*, 108.
11. Dana Seidenberg observes, in *Mercantile Adventurers*, that the women "adhered to familiar cultural and moral certitudes of an archaic Indian past" (93). While I agree with this observation, it needs qualification. It was not so much that the women adhered to an actual, archaic Indian past, as much as they were compelled to live in modern, diasporic re-imaginings of "Indianness."
12. Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (eds.), *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* (New York: Harvester and Wheatsheaf, 1993), 336.
13. Luis White, *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990).
14. McLintock notes that "Women are represented as the atavistic and authentic body of national tradition (inert, backward-looking and natural), embodying nationalism's conservative principle of continuity. Men, by contrast, represent the progressive agent of national modernity (forward-thrusting, potent and historic), embodying nationalism's progressive, or revolutionary, principle of discontinuity." *Imperial Leather*, 359.
15. As Thomas Lippman notes, "there is probably no issue that has more unfavorably influenced the Western world's image of Islam or more preoccupied lawmakers

in Moslem countries than the status of women." Quoted in Timothy Brennan, *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation* (Basingtoke: Macmillan, 1989), 126.

16. Gayatri C. Spivak writes sarcastically of "white men saving brown women from brown men." "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 297.
17. Nawal El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World* (London: Zed Press, 1980), i–ii.
18. Judith Butler argues that "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being". *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 33.
19. Christine Obbo, *African Women: Their Struggle for Economic Independence* (London: Zed Press, 1980).
20. Chelva Kanaganayakam, " 'Broadening the Substrata'," 31.
21. Dana Seidenberg, *Mercantile Adventurers*, 95, 99.
22. Christine Obbo, *African Women*, 101–102.
23. Among Ismailis—Vassanji's fictional Shamsis—the sartorial rule that women should wear the *pachedi* (the veil) in public was only lifted in the late 1950s, after the Aga Khan's edict. Always a modernizer who believed in "progress," Aga Khan III is also credited with several other reforms that were to change the image of the global Ismaili diaspora from a relatively conservative formation to a worldly, cosmopolitan network. He encouraged the Ismailis in East Africa to integrate into the region, to identify with — and to support — the incipient African nationalisms of the second-half of the 20th century, to open up their social facilities (schools, hospitals, charities, etc.) to black Africans, and to take up citizenship of East African states rather than that of Britain, India or Pakistan. See Agehananda Bharati, *The Asians in East Africa*, 316–320.
24. Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990).
25. Florence Stratton, *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (London: Heinemann, 1994), 69.
26. The different works of fiction Vassanji has produced so far are peopled by similar characters. Gregory, Amin Pipa, Nurmohamed Pipa, and Nyerere appear in both *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets*. Amin Pipa and Nurmohamed Pipa appear in both *The Gunny Sack* and *Uhuru Street*. As such, one can safely assume that the Mother figure in "Leaving" is just another rendition of Kulsum. Like Kulsum, she is a tailor and has a son who leaves for America to have a university education. Aloo of "Leaving" in *Uhuru Street* also seems to be a variation on Sona of *The Gunny Sack*.
27. Neloufer de Mel, "Mediating Origins," 169.
28. A similar way of thinking about step-children can be seen in *The Book of Secrets* where Pipa's new wife, Remti, rejects the presence of "the child of 'that woman' "—Pipa's dead wife, Mariamu—in her home because "[c]hildren of a previous marriage polluted the new one" (200).
29. For a related discussion, on how the "métis problem" in Dutch and French colonies was seen as a "moral" one, see Ann Laura Stoler "Sexual Affronts and Racial Frontiers."

30. Fanon's actual phrasing is, "You are rich because you are white, and you are white because you are rich." *The Wretched of the Earth* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), 31.
31. See Agehananda Bharati, *The Asians in East Africa*, Chapter Five.
32. Agehananda Bharati, *Asians in East Africa*, 160. In a 1987 interview with Dana April Seidenberg, Apa Bala Pant—Nehru's outstanding first High Commissioner to Kenya—reminiscing about the colonial days in Kenya, states that "The question of pollution was a powerful deterrent to any contact or relationship. The African never understood this but this resistance created conditions of reserve from the African also. Those who came from India: Gujarat and Punjab carried with them concepts of ritual pollution and divine purity. One feared becoming impure, unclean, just being too near the black African. After the third generation it is dying out now." *Mercantile Adventurers*, 95.
33. In his opening address to "The Asian African Heritage" exhibit which he curated at The National Museum of Kenya in 2000, Somjee notes that although "Asian Africans are always accused of being a closed society," little attention is paid to what that "closed-ness" contains: the vibrant "civil society" whose contribution to philanthropy, culture and the economy cannot be gainsaid. Unable to rely on British colonialists and post-independence governments for support, the subgroups of the Indian community—Sikh, Ismaili, Goan, Hindu—became self-reliant, building welfare organizations upon which all Kenyans have come to depend. Karl Vick, "A New View of Kenya's 'Asians': East Indians, Who Shunned Spotlight, Featured in Museum Exhibit," *The Washington Post*, March 15 (2000). Also see National Museums of Kenya & The Asian African Heritage Trust, *The Asian African Heritage: Identity and History* (Nairobi: National Museums of Kenya, 2000), a brochure prepared by Pheroze Nowrojee to mark the opening of the Asian African museum exhibit.
34. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 43.
35. Chris Dunton and Mai Palmberg, *Human Rights and Homosexuality in Africa*, Second expanded edition, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1996.
36. "Cameron Warns of African Aid Cuts to Anti-Gay Countries," www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-15243409, posted 31 Oct. 2011, accessed 26 April 2012.
37. For instance, Evan Mwangi notes that "in African discourse, queer is unspoken, hidden." *Africa Writes Back to Self: Metafiction, Gender, Sexuality* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), 189.
38. *Mail and Guardian* (Johannesburg), Sept. 29, 1995, p. 3.
39. Vijay Prashad, "Foreword: Speaking of Saris," in Shailja Patel (ed.), *Migritude* (New York: Kaya Press, 2010), ii.
40. Rasna Warah has noted that "most of his [Vassanji's] books romanticize pre-independence East Africa," an attitude which she attributes to the author's long stay in North America. Rasna Warah, *Red Soil and Roasted Maize: Selected Essays and Articles on Contemporary Kenya* (Bloomington: Author House, 2011), 17. Unlike Warah, I read Vassanji's nostalgia for the colonial period also as a reflection of his discontent with the politics of nationalism and socialism in independent Tanzania.
41. Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 15.

42. "Migritude/World Premiere," www.brownpapertickets.com/event/8375, posted 24 Aug. 2006, accessed 26 April 2012 (Publicity material for the spoken word theatre performance, "Migritude.").
43. See Alison Toron, "Refusing to Tell: Gender, Postcolonialism, and Withholding in M.G. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets*," *Postcolonial Text* 5, 3 (2009), 1–15.
44. Evan Mwangi, *Africa Writes Back to Self*, 232.
45. See Thomas R. Gensheimer, "Cross Cultural Currents: Swahili Urbanism in the Late Middle Ages," in Nezar Al Sayyad (ed.), *Hybrid Urbanism: On the Identity Discourse and the Built Environment* (Westport: Greenwood, 2001), 21–41; and Ali Mazrui, "Mombasa: Three Stages Towards Globalization," in Anthony D. King (ed.), *Representing the City: Ethnicity, Capital and Culture in the 21st Century Metropolis* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 158–176.
46. For a discussion of homosexuality in Mombasa, see G. M. Shepherd, "Rank, Gender and Homosexuality in Mombasa," in Pat Kaplan (ed.), *The Cultural Construction of Sexuality* (London & New York: Tavistock, 1987), 240–270; and Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe (eds.), *Boy Wives and Female Husbands: Studies in African Homosexualities* (New York: Palgrave, 1998).
47. Rosemary George, *The Politics of Home*, 3.

## 6 Miscegenation and Culture

1. Seidenberg, *Mercantile Adventurers*, 25.
2. Seidenberg, *Mercantile Adventurers*, 26.
3. See for instance, Bharati, *The Asians in East Africa*, Chapter 5.
4. Charles Sarvan, "The Asians in African Literature," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 11, 2 (1976), 160–170.
5. Mahmood Mamdani, "The Ugandan Asian Expulsion," 265–266.
6. Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in Charles Taylor, et al. (eds.), *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. & intro. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).
7. For a detailed discussion of alienation and cultural synthesis in East African Literature, see Chris Wanjala, *For Home and Freedom* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1980).
8. This was the title of Mugo Gatheru's autobiography, *Child of Two Worlds: A Kikuyu's Upbringing and Education* (London: Routledge, 1964).
9. Wanjala, *For Home and Freedom*, 23.
10. Okot p'Bitek, *Africa's Cultural Revolution* (Nairobi: Macmillan, 1973), 3.
11. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 89.
12. Taban lo Liyong, *Meditations in Limbo* (Nairobi: Equatorial Publishers, 1970), 72.
13. Taban lo Liyong, *The Last Word*, 113.
14. Reinhard Sander called him "An East African Yankee." Reinhard Sander, "An East African Yankee," *East African Journal* 9, 7 (July 1972), 27–35.
15. For a discussion of the history of the term "hybridity", see Robert C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).
16. Taban lo Liyong, "The Marriage of Black and White," in David Cook and David Rubadiri (eds.), *Poems From East Africa* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1972), 86–87.
17. See, for instance, David T. Goldberg (ed.), *Anatomy of Racism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1990); and Albert Memmi, *Racism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000). Both suggest that the belief in the

existence of races—"racialism"—in itself is not necessarily negative. The belief in the existence of races only becomes "racism" when it is used to legitimize hostility, aggression and domination.

18. Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," 28.
19. Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," 32–36. A similar position is taken by Debbora Battaglia, who argues that "there is no selfhood apart from the collaborative practice of its figuration. The 'self' is a representational economy: a reification continually defeated by mutable entanglements with other subjects' histories, experiences, self-representations; with their texts, conduct, gestures, objectifications." "Problematizing the Self: A Thematic Introduction," in Debbora Battaglia (ed.), *Rhetorics of Self-Making* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 2.
20. Neil Bissoondath, "True Expatriate Love," *Saturday Night*, June 1991, 44.
21. For a discussion of the politics of "multiracialism" in late colonial East Africa, see Sophia Mustafa, *The Tanganyika Way* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 77–83; Dana April Seidenberg, *The Asians and Uhuru: The Role of a Minority Community in Kenya Politics, 1939–1963*, PhD Dissertation, Syracuse University, 1979.
22. See, for example, Jagjit Singh's play, "Sweet Scum of Freedom", in Gwyneth Anderson (ed.) *African Theatre* (London: Heinemann, 1973), and Peter Nazareth's novel *In a Brown Mantle*.
23. Annie K. Koshi, "Interview with Tejani," *Ufahamu* 21, 3 (1993), 52.
24. According to Robert Young, in re-invoking the concept of hybridity "we are utilizing the vocabulary of the Victorian extreme right as much as the notion of an organic process of the grafting of diversity into singularity." *Colonial Desire*, 10.
25. Stuart Hall, "Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Racial Dominance," in *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism* (Paris: UNESCO, 1980), 338.
26. Richa Nagar, "The Politics of Gendered Boundaries: South Asian Communities in Tanzania," *Ghadar* 1, 1 (1997), online journal, http://www.proxsa.org/resources/ghadar/v1n1/richa.html.
27. Bahadur Tejani, "Farewell Uganda."
28. Jamie James, "The Toronto Circle," *The Atlantic Monthly* April (2000), 130.
29. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "When Ethnic Studies Are Un-American," *Wall Street Journal* 23 April 1990, A14.
30. Asked about the possibility of combining African and Indian cultures, Vassanji quips that, "I don't see any obvious merging, but so what? Our Indianness was already transformed by the Africanness." Chelva Kanaganayakam, " 'Broadening the Substrata'," 21.
31. Chelva Kanaganayakam, " 'Broadening the Substrata'," 29.
32. Dorothy Hammond and Alta Jablow, *The Africa That Never Was: Four Centuries of British Writing About Africa* (New York: Twayne, 1970), 110. A more systematic study of the place of the *métissage* in colonial cultural politics can be found in Ann Laura Stoler, "Sexual Affronts and Racial Frontiers." For Stoler, the Eurasians of South East Asia were "a dangerous source of subversion," seen not only as "a threat to white prestige," but also as "an embodiment of European degeneration and moral decay" (199).
33. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 90.
34. For a discussion of people of dual African-Indian parentage in East Africa—known in the derogatory Gujarati terms, *Jotawa* or *chotara*—see Bharati, *The Asians in East Africa*, 160–166.

35. See Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991* (London: Granta, 1991), especially the essay entitled "Imaginary Homelands," 9–21.
36. Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Identity, Authenticity, Survival," 154–155.
37. Rocio G. Davis, "Negotiating Place: Identity and Community in M. G. Vassanji's *Uhuru Street*," *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 30, 3 (1999), 19.
38. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 4.
39. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 4.
40. For a discussion of the debt modern black notions of culture and tradition owe to European thought, see Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).
41. Peter Nazareth, "The First Tanzan/Asian Novel," *Research in African Literatures* 21, 4 (1990), 132.
42. The novel uses Shylock's famous defense of the Jews in *The Merchant of Venice* to reflect on the predicament of the Asians in East Africa (221–222); Salim's protestation of nativity against Amina's accusation of his alienness ("I too am an African. I was born here." *The Gunny Sack*, 211) is a reworking of the line which the narrator of Nazareth's *In a Brown Mantle* uses to ward off Gombe Kukwaya's racist taunts ("I was born here. I was even conceived here." *In A Brown Mantle*, 75); "Shamsi" is an appropriation of "Samsher," the name of the protagonist of Tejani's *Day After Tomorrow*, and the name Salim is derived from Naipaul's "Salim" and "Saleem" of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*.
43. Amit Chaudhuri, "Lure of the Hybrid: What the Post-Colonial Indian Novel Means to the West," *Times Literary Supplement* 3 September (1999), 6.
44. Peter Simatei, "Voyaging on the Mists of Memory: M. G. Vassanji and the Asian Quest/ion in East Africa," *English Studies in Africa* 43, 1 (2000), 38.
45. Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 13.
46. Joan Dayan, "Paul Gilroy's Slaves, Ships, and Routes: The Middle Passage as Metaphor," *Research in African Literatures* 27, 4 (1996), 12.
47. Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World*, 41.
48. Amit Chaudhuri, "Lure of the Hybrid," 6.
49. Ann Laura Stoler's extensive and exemplary work on the politics of racial categories in Dutch colonial Southeast Asia, one of whose key points is how hybridity in that context undermined the neat boundaries of colonial rule, is a useful case in point. See, for example, her article "Sexual Affronts and Racial Frontiers." Although her argument is illuminating in many ways, she misses the opportunity to show how colonialism thrived on its ability to manage the threat of transgression posed to it by the hybrids.
50. Neloufer De Mel, "Mediating Origins: Moyez Vassanji and the Discursivities of Migrant Identity," in Abdulrazak Gurnah (ed.), *Essays of African Writing, Vol 11: Contemporary Literature* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1995), 175.
51. Jacqueline Bardolph argues that Vassanji explores the relationship between the Africans and Asians "in a way that is never manichaean, with no trace of idealization or sentimentality in the treatment of either group." "East Africa: The Novel since the Eighties", in André Viola, Jacqueline Bardolph and Denise Coussy, *New Fiction in English from Africa* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), 80.
52. Quoted in Steve Burniston and Chris Weedon, "Ideology, Subjectivity and the Artistic Text," in Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (eds.), *On Ideology* (London: Hutchinson, 1977), 204.

53. Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 291.
54. The "mimic man" is a figure quite prominent in the post-colonial literature produced from the 1950s to the 1970s. See V. S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* and Ferdinand Oyono's *Houseboy* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990).
55. Simon Gikandi, *Writing in Limbo*, 131.
56. Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World*, 125.

## 7 Romancing Decolonization

1. Neil Lazarus, "Disavowing Decolonization: Fanon, Nationalism and the Problematic Representation in Current Theories of Colonial Discourses." *Research in African Literatures* 24, 4 (1993), 70.
2. Ranajit Guha, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India," in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies I. Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986), 4. Declan Kiberd has also noted of nationalism that it is normally "a broad and comprehensive movement, containing progressive as well as conservative elements." Declain Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Vintage, 1996), 642.
3. Kwame Anthony Appiah and Paul Gilroy are notable examples of the former tendency while Arun Mukherjee and Christopher Miller are representatives of the latter. See Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House*; Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*; Arun Mukherjee, *Oppositional Aesthetics*; and Christopher Miller, *Theories of Africans: Francophone Literature and Anthropology in Africa* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990).
4. Terry Eagleton, "Nationalism: Irony and Commitment," 24.
5. Terry Eagleton "Nationalism: Irony and Commitment," 23. This position is shared by Aijaz Ahmad who, although wary of nationalism's potential for chauvinism and violence notes that "a blanket contempt for all nationalisms tends to slide over the question of imperialism. I think that those who are fighting against imperialism cannot just forego their nationalism. They have to go through it, transform their nation-state in tangible ways, and then arrive at the other side." "Culture, Nationalism, and the Role of Intellectuals," Interview with Erika Repovz and Nikolai Jeffs, in Ellen Meiksins Wood and John Bellamy Foster (eds.), *In Defence of History: Marxism and the Postmodern Agenda* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997), 54.
6. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967). For Fanon, "The settler and the native are old acquaintances. In fact, the settler is right when he speaks of knowing 'them' very well. For it is the settler who has brought the native into existence and who perpetuates his existence" (36).
7. Ambu Patel, *Struggle for 'Release Jomo & His Colleagues'* (Nairobi: New Kenya Publishers, 1963). Agehananda Bharati has described it as "a pathetic little book which contains well over a hundred statements of varying length, by such very different people as Ashok Mehta, Oginga Odinga, Indira Gandhi, and a motley symposium of East African Indian leaders, businessmen of stature, etc." *The Asians in East Africa*, 332–333.
8. For further information on Ambu Patel, see Seidenberg, *Mercantile Adventurers*.
9. For a eulogy of Pinto, see Anon. (ed.), *Pio Gama Pinto, Independent Kenya's First Martyr: Socialist and Freedom Fighter* (Nairobi: Pan Africa Press, 1966). The booklet

features contributions form Oginga Odinga, Joseph Murumbi, Ramogi Achieng Oneko and Bildad Kaggia, among others.
10. Vassanji fictionalizes such figures in his short story "Ebrahim and the Businessmen" in *Uhuru Street*.
11. John Maximian Nazareth, *Brown Man Black Country*, 190.
12. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 119.
13. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 28.
14. Arun Mukherjee, *Oppositional Aesthetics*, 169.
15. Mukherjee, *Oppositional Aesthetics*, 170.
16. Homi Bhabha, "DissemiNation," 305–306.
17. Bhabha, "DissemiNation," 299.
18. Tom Mboya, *Freedom and After* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1963), 61–62.
19. Mboya's notion of nationalism is predicated on an elitist assumption that the masses are ignorant and can only access the essence of nationalism through a simplified idiom, even if it remains vague and generalized. However, as many recent historians of nationalism have shown, the success of nationalism in Africa lies in the fact that it was also constructed from below, from the fact that the so-called "masses" could critically read and disaggregate ostensibly dazzling slogans.
20. Homi Bhabha, "DissemiNation," 292.
21. Throughout the chapter, I use the term "romance" in two different senses: as a tale and as an act of love. In the first instance, I am referring to the stories that the nation tells of itself, and in the second, I am gesturing at the attempts within East African Asian writing to project the desire for national harmony through the tropes of sexuality and friendship.
22. Ernest Renan, "What is a Nation?," in Homi Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), 11.
23. Jagjit Singh, "Portrait of an Asian as an East African," in David Cook and David Rubadiri (eds.), *Poems From East Africa* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1972). Further references are in the text.
24. As many scholars have tried to argue, African nationalism is not a uniformly bourgeois formation as some have presented it. Nationalism in Africa has borne the interests of widely disparate social groups, even if nationalist elites might seem to be most evident in its constitution. See, for instance, Norma Kriger, *Zimbabwe's Guerrilla War: Peasant Voices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), Neil Lazarus, "Disavowing Decolonization," and Terence Ranger, *Peasant Consciousness and Guerilla War in Zimbabwe* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985).
25. Chelva Kanaganayakam, " 'Broadening the Substrata'," 29.
26. I am taking a leaf from Peter Nazareth whose narrator-protagonist in *In A Brown Mantle* refers to himself as a "bastard" of "Mother Africa" (150). By "bastard histories," I am referring to the contradictory social and cultural categories, each with their own pasts and interests, all of which jostle to be accommodated within the new nation. These include the various ethnic, regional, linguistic, cultural, party-political and class groupings. "Bastard" is thus connotative of excess, that which the national narrative cannot contain.
27. M.G. Vassanji, *The Gunny Sack*, 222.
28. Langston Hughes, "I, Too, Sing America," in Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps (eds.), *The Poetry Of The Negro, 1746–1949* (New York: Doubleday, 1949), 97.
29. Claude Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986), 297–298.

30. The "toes of Africa" is a figurative reference to the southern tip of the African continent, which was historically exposed to some of the worst excesses of racial ideology.
31. Peter Nazareth, *In a Brown Mantle*, 42.
32. Jagjit Singh, "Sweet Scum of Freedom," in Gwyneth Henderson (ed.), *African Theatre* (London: Heinemann, 1973). Further references are in the text.
33. As Wole Soyinka correctly points out in his judge's comment on the play, Singh "has successfully pointed out that flesh seems to transcend the basic superficial prejudices." "Sweet Scum of Freedom," 36.
34. For a study of the prostitute figure in African writing, see Fikeni E. M. K. Senkoro, *The Prostitute in African Literature* (Dar es Salaam: Dar es Salaam University Press, 1982).
35. I owe this insight to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who maintain that the Jews functioned in Nazi rhetoric as scapegoats for the whole capitalist machine. *The Dialectic of the Enlightenment* (London: Lane, 1973).
36. Wole Soyinka, "The Writer in A Modern African State," in Per Wastberg (ed.), *The Writer in Modern Africa* (Uppsala: The Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1968), 20.
37. Okot p'Bitek, "Indigenous Ills," *Transition*, The Anniversary Issue, 75/76, 40. Originally published in *Transition* 32 (1967).
38. Sarvan, "The Asians in African Literature," 168.
39. Kuldip Sondhi, "Undesignated." In David Cook and Miles Lee (eds.), *Short East African Plays in English* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1968). Further references are in the text.

## 8 Memory, Metafiction and Modernity

1. David Cowart, *History and the Contemporary Novel* (Carbondale: South Illinois University Press, 1989), 1.
2. Wole Ogundele has observed that African nationalist historiography has attempted to homogenize histories of different peoples caught within the boundaries of the new nation-states, in a manner that is similar to colonialism's attempt to institute a narrative of human history organized around the evolution of different people to a state of "civilization," as defined by Europeans. In both of these cases, history is reduced to a singular force whose trajectory can be neatly discerned. "Devices of Evasion: The Mythic Versus the Historical Imagination in the Postcolonial African Novel," *Research in African Literatures* 33, 3 (2002), 131–132.
3. Chelva Kanaganayakam, " 'Broadening the Substrata'," 28.
4. Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London and New York: Methuen, 1984), 2. Ngugi wa Thiongo's *Petals of Blood* is the only other East African novel, to my mind, that comes close to *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets* in its self-conscious reflection upon the nature of historical memory.
5. Charles Sarvan, "M. G. Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack*: A Reflection on History and the Novel", *Modern Fiction Studies* 37, 3 (1991), 511.
6. Louis Mink, "History and Fiction as Modes of Comprehension," in Ralph Cohen (ed.), *New Directions in Literary History* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), 113.
7. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), 83.

8. Chelva Kanaganayakam, " 'Broadening the Substrata'," 20.
9. Simon Gikandi, "Reading the Referent," 87.
10. For an elaboration on these narrative strategies, see Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory and Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988); Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (New York: Methuen, 1984); and Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction*.
11. An incisive summary and critique of this famous debate is provided in E. S. Atieno-Odhiambo, "The Production of History in Kenya: The Mau Mau Debate," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 25, 2 (1991), 300-307, and John Lonsdale, "Mau Maus of the Mind: Making Mau Mau and Remaking Kenya," *Journal of African History* 31 (1990), 393–405.
12. Carol M. Sicherman, "Ngugi wa Thiong'o and the Writing of Kenyan History," *Research in African Literatures* 20, 3 (1989), 347.
13. Atieno-Odhiambo, "The Production of History in Kenya," 301.
14. Atieno-Odhiambo, "The Production of History in Kenya," 301.
15. Carol Sicherman, "Ngugi wa Thiong'o," 348.
16. Carol Sicherman, "Ngugi wa Thiong'o," 360.
17. Carol Sicherman, "Ngugi wa Thiong'o," 358.
18. Atieno-Odhiambo, "The Production of History in Kenya," 305.
19. N. Gatheru Wanjohi, "Historical Scholarship in The East African Context," *International Social Science Journal* 33, 4 (1981), 667.
20. Wanjohi, "Historical Scholarship in the East African Context," 671. This call for self-reflexivity is echoed in Brenda Cooper's call in *To Lay These Secrets Open: Evaluating African Literature* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1992) for critics of African literature "to be as overt and as forthcoming as possible about the framework from which our judgments spring" (1).
21. Wanjohi, "Historical Scholarship in the East African Context," 671.
22. James Ogude, "Ngugi's Concept of History and Post-colonial Discourses in Kenya," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 31, 1 (1997), 87.
23. I use the language of Christian theology extensively in this paragraph with a wink at the deep implication of certain strands of Marxist historical scholarship in discourses of sin and confession, traces of which can be seen, for instance, in Brenda Cooper's title: *To Lay These Secrets Open*. For an early critique of the enmeshment of Marxism in Christian theology, see Ayi Kwei Armah's essay, "African Socialism: Utopian or Scientific," *Presence Africaine* 64 (1967). A similar purchase of the discourses of sin and confession can be seen in much of recent postmodernist criticism in which rituals of cleansing and expiation are staged in discussions of modernity and the Enlightenment.
24. Tony Bennett, *Outside Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 42.
25. Michael Green, *Novel Histories: Past, Present, and Future in South African Fiction* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1997), 1.
26. J. M. Coetzee, "The Novel Today," *Upstream* 6, 21 (1988), 2–3.
27. Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969). According to Lukács, the setting up of "the historical novel as a genre or sub-genre in its own right" rests on the false premise of "the separation of the present from the past, the abstract opposition of the one to the other" (289).
28. Arthur Marwick, "Two Approaches to Historical Study: The Metaphysical (Including 'Postmodernism') and the Historical," *Journal of Contemporary History* 30 (1995), 5–35.
29. Kanaganayakam, " 'Broadening the Substrata'," 22.

30. For further elaboration on the idea of memory as a past–present relation, see Ronald Grele, *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History* (Chicago: Precedent, 1985), 251; James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 211; and Richard Terdiman, *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 8.
31. Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000), 251.
32. This compound name, which Salim uses to refer to the English headmistress of his primary school, combines her maiden and married names. It gestures at the strong sense of fondness that Salim has for his childhood, a nostalgia whose key marker is a reluctance to give up old identities. A similar attachment to childhood experience is also reflected in Vassanji's collection *Uhuru Street* in which the renaming of Kichwele Street as Uhuru Street (*uhuru* is Swahili for freedom) acts as an index for the disruptive change occasioned by Tanganyikan independence.
33. See Peter Simatei, *The Novel and the Politics of Nation Building in East Africa* (Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies Series, 2001).
34. See Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (ed.), *Alternative Modernities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); and Charles Taylor, "Modern Social Imaginaries," *Public Culture* 14, 1 (2002), 91–92.
35. For a thorough critique of the tendency in postmodernism to universalize the crisis of modernity in Western philosophy, see, for instance, Dennis Ekpo, "Towards a Post-Africanism: Contemporary African Thought and Postmodernism", *Textual Practice* 9, 1 (1995), 121–135.
36. Eschatology simply refers to the understanding of time "as a sequence of specific events that befall a chosen people," the belief that history is the fulfillment of destiny. Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press 1983), 2.
37. For further reading on the Promethean, creative–destructive cycle, see Wole Soyinka's seminal collection of essays, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).
38. Richard Terdiman, *Discourse/Counter-Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 97.
39. Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987), 3–4.
40. See, for instance, Stephen Toulmin who suggests that the initial secular spirit of the Renaissance was soon subverted by philosophers of the Enlightenment, such as Descartes, whose thinking was radically informed by Christian theology, in spite of their cultivation of a scientific outlook. *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), 30–44.
41. My phrasing here derives from one of the archetypal figures of modernist exile, James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, who states that "History . . . is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake." *Ulysses* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 42.
42. Richard Terdiman, *Present Past*, 347.
43. "Presentism" is particularly prevalent in postmodernist theorizing on history in which the usability of the past in the present is emphasized, with scant attention paid to the ways in which the past limits its own deployment. A good example of this can be seen in Shane Rhodes, "Frontier Fiction: Reading Books in M. G. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets*," *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 29, 1 (1998), 179–193. Rhodes claims that historiography "is always a fictional

process of mastery over *a silent and mute body* of knowledge, a body that must be simultaneously *invaded and conquered* (180; my emphasis).

44. Susheila Nasta, "Interview: Moyez Vassanji," *Wasafiri*, 13 (1991), 19–21.
45. Neloufer de Mel, "Mediating Origins," 162–163. Nonetheless, de Mel qualifies this point by noting that "transcribing a collective history [allows] Vassanji a creative space in which, with sensitivity, he redresses certain imbalances to include disparate voices that would otherwise never have been the subject of history, and recoup from the margins incidents in the lives of ordinary citizens to relate them as *grand narrative*" (162; my emphasis).
46. In a letter to Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno once observed that "every reification is a forgetting." Quoted in Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 229. Also see Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Lane, 1972), 230.
47. M. G. Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets*, 92. This controversial statement about being and cognition is made by the character Sona in a talk he delivers in Toronto. Translated into the scene of historiography, it would read thus: "There is no past unless it is remembered." This riddle, which lies at the heart of historiographic metafiction, is one of Vassanji's primary concerns in both *The Book of Secrets* and *The Gunny Sack*.
48. Charles Taylor, "Modern Social Imaginaries," 91.
49. Richard Terdiman, *Present Past*, 3 & 5.
50. Patricia Tobin, *Time and the Novel: The Genealogical Imperative* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 5.
51. Richard Terdiman, *Present Past*, 22.
52. Richard Terdiman, *Present Past*, 25 & 14.
53. Shane Rhodes, "Frontier Fiction," 180.
54. According to Richard Terdiman, "memory still incorporates a powerful intuition that the past is not just our invention. *The past still answers us and still constrains our own response to it.*" *Present Past*, 350.
55. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 216–217.
56. Arun Mukherjee, *Oppositional Aesthetics*, 178.
57. *The Book of Secrets* is full of riddles that remain unsolved even at the very end of Fernandes's research. Among the unsolved puzzles are the following: the culprit behind Mariamu's murder (293–298); whether there was a sexual relationship between Corbin and Mariamu; whether Aku is Pipa's or Corbin's natural son (156); whether there was a homosexual attraction between Fernandes and Richard Gregory, the English teacher (297); and whether Gregory had an affair with Anne, the wife to Alfred Corbin (325). The unfinished nature of memory in the novel can be read as a jesting, metafictional commentary on those detective stories in which all secrets are ultimately revealed, all puzzles solved.
58. Dambudzo Marechera, *The House of Hunger* (London: Heinemann, 1978).
59. Richard Terdiman, *Present Past*, 48.
60. Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction*, 3.
61. Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The Rise of Christian Europe* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1965). For Trevor-Roper, "Perhaps in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But, at present there is none: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness . . . the unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe" (9).

62. For a discussion of how anthropology denies the "coevalness" of cultures by its affirmation of difference as temporal distance, see Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other*, Chapter 1. James Clifford also presents a fascinating discussion of the "ethnographic pastoral" in his influential essay, "On Ethnographic Allegory," in James Clifford and George Marcus (eds.), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).
63. Eleni Coundouriotis, *Claiming History*, 4.
64. Stephen Greenblatt, "Shakespeare and the Exorcists," in Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (eds.), *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory* (London: Methuen, 1985), 164.

## Conclusion

1. Simon Gikandi, "Reading the Referent," 89.
2. Anne McClintock, "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term 'Post-colonialism,' " in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (eds.), *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: A Reader* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 299.
3. Gikandi, "Reading the Referent," 101.
4. Gikandi, "Reading the Referent," 101–102.
5. The chapters that make up the novel originally appeared in various journals between 1974 and 1982. The first full edition of the novel was published by the Writers Workshop, Calcutta, in 1984.
6. Wole Soyinka, "The Writer in a Modern African State," 21.
7. See George, *The Politics of Home*, 181–182. Even Kuldip Sondhi's play, *With Strings*, which I have not discussed in this book, uses a budding romance between Cynthia (a young African woman) and Mohan (a young Asian man) to imagine a new nation devoid of racial and tribal parochialism. *With Strings* in Cosmo Pieterse (ed.), *Ten One-Act Plays* (London: Heinemann, 1968).

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# Index